



RURAL ACCOUNTABLE CARE GUIDE

Preparing Rural Health for the Approaching Accountable Care Era



ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This strategic guide involved input through participation by many thought leaders of the following sponsoring organizations who have come together to form the Toward Accountable Care Consortium and Initiative (“TAC”). This paper would not have been possible without the generous support of all TAC member organizations, including significant support from the North Carolina Medical Society, as well as a substantial grant from The Physicians Foundation. Special thanks to the North Carolina Academy of Family Physicians and North Carolina Society of Anesthesiologists, whose seminal ACO white papers are the underpinning of this Toolkit. We are grateful to Julian D. (Bo) Bobbitt, Jr. of the Smith Anderson law firm, for compiling the information in this non-technical “blueprint” format, and to the following individuals for their expertise and input: J. Bass Briggs, MD Lillington Family Medical Center, PA; Martha Chesnutt, MD, Boice-Willis Clinic, PA; Chris Collins, Office of Rural Health, NC DHHS; Jenna Huggins, Mutual Drug Company; John Lange, independent medical system consultant; Shawn Parker, JD, Smith Anderson law firm; Rueben Rivers, MD, Cumberland Internal Medicine, PA; Lisa Shock, PA-C, Evolent Health/Wake Med Key Community Care; Karen Smith, MD, Karen L. Smith, MD, PA; Franklin Walker, North Carolina Medical Society Foundation; and Gordon Wilhout, MD, Berkeley Family Practice/Roper St. Francis Health Alliance. This guide would not have be possible without the efforts of these individuals.

County / Regional Medical Societies

Cleveland County Medical Society
Craven-Pamlico-Jones County Medical Society
Durham-Orange County Medical Society
Mecklenburg County Medical Society
Forsyth-Stokes-Davie County Medical Society
New Hanover-Pender County Medical Society
Pitt County Medical Society
Rutherford County Medical Society
Western Carolina Medical Society
Wake County Medical Society

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Specialty Societies

Carolinas Chapter, American Association of Clinical Endocrinology
North Carolina Academy of Family Physicians
North Carolina Chapter of American College of Cardiology
North Carolina Chapter of the American College of Physicians
North Carolina College of Emergency Physicians
North Carolina Council on Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
North Carolina Dermatology Association
North Carolina Neurological Society
North Carolina Obstetrical and Gynecological Society
North Carolina Orthopaedic Association
North Carolina Pediatric Society
North Carolina Psychiatric Association
North Carolina Radiologic Society
North Carolina Society of Anesthesiologists
North Carolina Society of Asthma, Allergy & Clinical Immunology
North Carolina Society of Eye Physicians and Surgeons
North Carolina Society of Gastroenterology
North Carolina Society of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery
North Carolina Oncology Association
North Carolina Society of Pathologists
North Carolina Society of Plastic Surgeons
North Carolina Spine Society
North Carolina Urological Association

State Societies / Organizations

Community Care of North Carolina
Carolinas Center for Hospice and End of Life Care
North Carolina Academy of Physician Assistants
North Carolina Association of Local Health Directors
North Carolina Community Health Center Association
North Carolina Foundation for Advanced Health Programs
North Carolina Healthcare Quality Alliance
North Carolina Medical Group Managers
North Carolina Medical Society

INTRODUCTION

This strategic guide involved input through participation by many thought leaders who have come together to form the Toward Accountable Care Consortium and Initiative (“TAC”). This paper would not have been possible without the generous support of all TAC member organizations, including significant support from the North Carolina Medical Society, as well as a substantial grant from The Physicians Foundation. We are grateful to Julian D. (“Bo”) Bobbitt, Jr. of the Smith Anderson law firm, who has many years of experience providing strategic counsel regarding integrated care, for compiling the information in this non-technical “blueprint” format.

Part One contains the necessary elements for a successful Accountable Care Organization (“ACO”) and implementation guidance that transcend specialty or facility and apply equally to all ACO stakeholders.

The purpose of this paper is to arm you with knowledge and confidence as you consider joining or forming an ACO.

Part Two applies the principles and processes of the Guide to provide specific strategies and practical step-by-step guidance using concrete examples used by different physician specialties, including how to apply successfully for the Medicare Shared Savings Program.



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Part Two: The Rural Accountable Care Guide

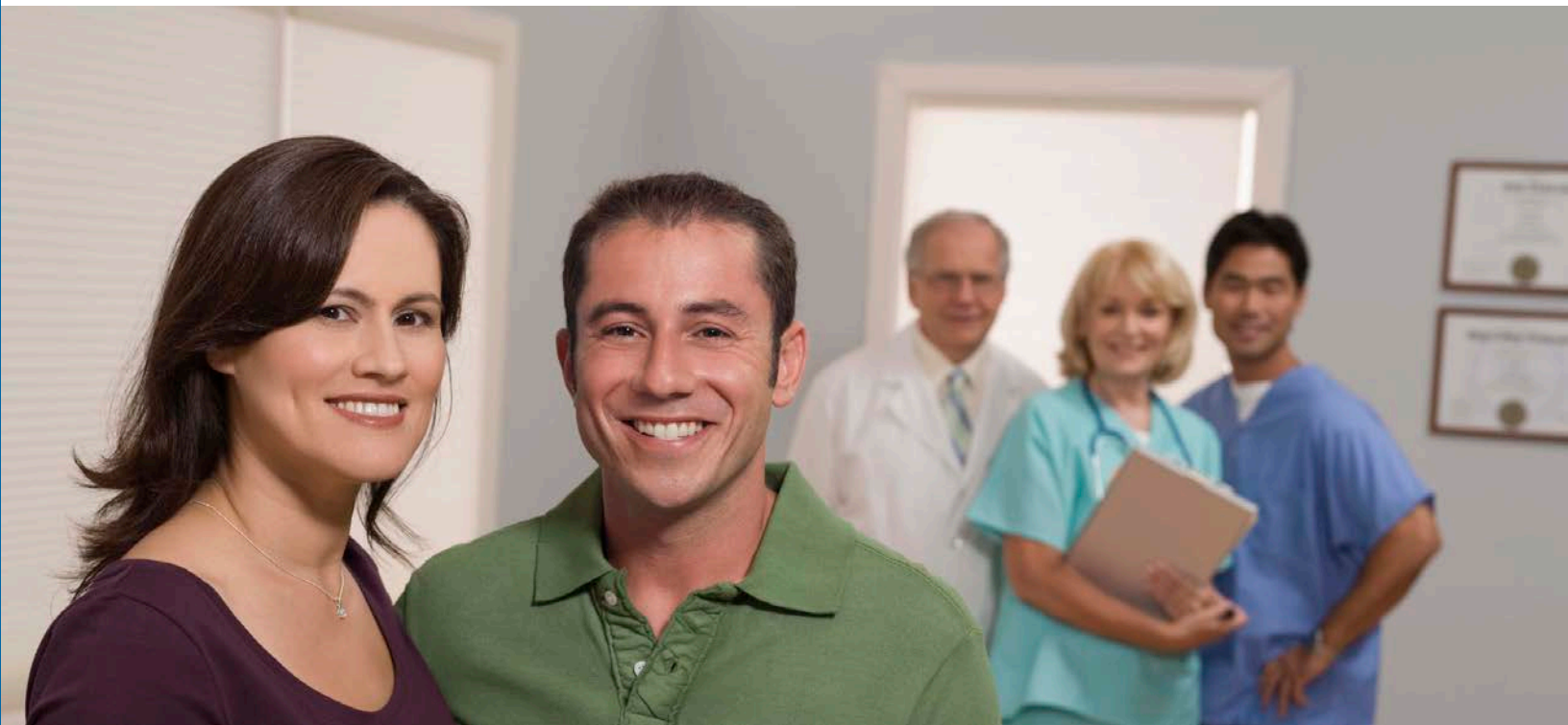
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The Physician's Accountable Care Toolkit

How to Identify and Implement the Essential Elements for Accountable Care Organization Success



North Carolina  **Medical Society**
Leadership in Medicine

 **THE PHYSICIANS FOUNDATION**
Empowering Physicians
Improving Healthcare

 **SMITH ANDERSON**

Toward  **Accountable Care Consortium**

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I. Purpose Of The Accountable Care Guide

Accountable Care Organizations (“ACOs”) are emerging as a leading model to address health care costs and fragmented care delivery. For example, in 2012, Accountable Care is being considered for implementation by virtually every private and public payor in North Carolina. It transcends federal health regulatory legislation and Medicare. The purpose of this ACO Guide is to bring together in one source a non-technical explanation of the essential elements required for any successful ACO and practical step-by-step guidance on how to achieve each element. Because a successful ACO must be “win/win”, with every collaborative participant incented and empowered to achieve their optimum value-added contribution to the enterprise, these principles transcend medical specialty, employment status, payor relationship, or facility type. This Guide works for you whether you are a primary care physician, a hospital CEO, or a specialist physician. Although ACOs are still evolving and definitive predictions are impossible at this time, the goal of the Guide is to give any reader a firm sense of the strengths and weaknesses of any ACO model they may encounter and confidence about whether to join one or to create one. There are answers to questions about who should join, who should lead, what infrastructure will work, and the phases of development to be followed.¹

II. What Is An ACO?

A. Definitions

Former Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (“CMS”) Mark McClellan, M.D., Ph.D. described an ACO as follows: “ACOs consist of providers who are jointly held accountable for achieving measured quality improvements and reductions in the rate of spending growth. Our definition emphasizes that these cost and quality improvements must achieve overall per capita improvements in quality and cost, and that ACOs should have at least limited accountability for achieving these improvements while caring for a defined population of patients.”² Similarly, the National Committee for Quality Assurance (“NCQA”) included the following definition in its draft ACO criteria: “Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) are provider-based organizations that take responsibility for meeting the healthcare needs of a defined population with the goal of simultaneously improving health, improving patient experiences, and reducing per capita costs....[T]here is emerging consensus that ACOs must include a group of physicians with a strong primary care base and sufficient other specialties that support the care needs of a defined population of patients. A well-run ACO should align the clinical and financial incentives of its providers...ACOs will also need the administrative infrastructure to manage budgets, collect data, report performance, make payments related to performance, and organize providers around shared goals.”³ (Emphasis added.)

Strategic Note: The part of the definition relating to patient populations represents a major shift in practice orientation, and is very alien to a typical physician’s training and day-to-day focus.

¹ It is not the purpose of this Guide to provide legal advice. Any person or organization considering participation in an ACO should seek the advice of legal counsel.

² Mark McClellan, Director of the Engleberg Center for Health Care Reform at the Brookings Institution, *A National Strategy to Put Accountable Care Into Practice*, Health Affairs (May 2010), p. 983.

³ National Committee for Quality Assurance, *Accountable Care Organization (ACO) Draft 2011 Criteria*, p. 3. (hereinafter “NCQA”).

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Without grasping this shift, an understanding of ACOs will remain elusive. It also is important to note what is not in the definition. No definitions specify any particular type of legal entity (i.e., IPA, PHO, employed). There is no mandatory organizational form for an ACO.

The final Medicare Shared Savings Program rule (Final Rule)⁴ released by CMS in 2011 contains an interesting definition emphasizing structure in contrast to the ones above focusing on function: “Accountable Care Organization (ACO) means a legal entity that is recognized and authorized under applicable State law, as identified by a Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN), and comprised of an eligible group (as defined at § 425.5(b)) of ACO participants that work together to manage and coordinate care for Medicare fee-for-service beneficiaries and have established a mechanism for shared governance that provides all ACO participants with an appropriate proportionate control over the ACO’s decision-making process.”⁵

B. PPACA Requirements

ACOs eligible for the Medicaid Shared Savings Program under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010⁶ must meet the following criteria:

- That groups of providers have established structures for reporting quality and cost of health care, leadership and management that includes clinical and administrative systems; receiving and distributing shared savings; and shared governance.
- Willing to become accountable for the quality, cost, and overall care of the Medicare fee-for-service beneficiaries assigned to it.
- Minimum three-year contract.
- Sufficient primary care providers to have at least 5,000 patients assigned.
- Processes to promote evidence-based medicine, patient engagement, and coordination of care.
- Ability to demonstrate patient-centeredness criteria, such as individualized care plans.

The Medicare Final Rule and three other related documents involving five federal agencies amplify these PPACA criteria. A special section devoted to the Medicare Shared Savings ACO Program is found in Part Two of the Toolkit.

⁴ 76 Fed. Reg. 67802 (Nov. 2, 2011)

⁵ 76 Fed. Reg. 67974

⁶ Section 3022 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (amends Title XVIII of the Social Security Act (42 USC 1395 *et seq.*)).

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C. How Is It Different From a Medical Home?

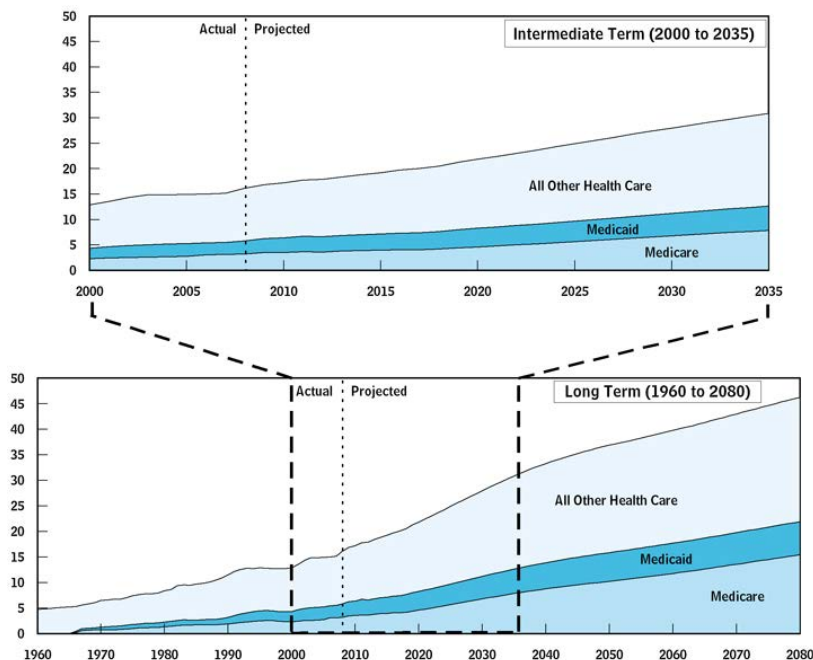
The Patient-Centered Medical Home (“Medical Home”) emphasizes strengthening and empowering primary care to coordinate care for patients across the continuum of care. It is complimentary to the ACO and can become the core of an ACO, but it is different in two main respects: (1) Financial Incentives - The Medical Home lacks the shared accountability feature in that it does not have financial incentives, such as shared savings, motivating providers to work together to deliver the highest quality care at the lowest cost with the greatest patient satisfaction. (2) Specialists/ Hospital Linkage - Even though there are Medical Home-only ACOs, a typical ACO is also different from a Medical Home in that it tends to have relationships with select specialists and hospitals across the full continuum of care for the targeted initiative.

III. Why Should I Care?

Health spending is unsustainable, even before coverage expansion of the 2010 federal health reforms. With 19% of Gross Domestic Product (“GDP”) being the rough estimate of the amount the United States can collect in taxes and other revenues, by 2035, Medicare and Medicaid are predicted to consume 13% of GDP and health care costs will consume 31% of GDP. In other words, health care alone will cost well over all we collect. By 2080, absent drastic change, Medicaid and Medicare will consume all of our tax and other revenues, and total health spending will claim 46% of GDP. The rest, defense, education, roads, etc. we can only pay for by borrowing. President Obama is the first President facing bankruptcy of the Medicare System during a term in office.

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Total Spending for Health Care Under the Congressional Budget Office's Extended Baseline Scenario



There is consensus that much of this is avoidable. The now-famous New Yorker article by Dr. Atul Gawande showing Medicare spending to be twice as high in McAllen, Texas as in El Paso, became required reading in the White House. It said: “The real puzzle of American Healthcare... is not why McAllen is different from El Paso. It’s why El Paso isn’t like McAllen. Every incentive in the system is an invitation to go the way McAllen has gone.”⁷



Article By Influential Writer Sparks Strong Debate

The Congressional Budget Office Report on the ACO’s predecessor, the Bonus-Eligible Organization, includes this rationale: “[P]roviders have a financial incentive to provide higher-intensity care in greater volume, which contributes to the fragmented delivery of care that currently exists.”

⁷ Atul Gawande, *The Cost Conundrum*, *The New Yorker* (June 1, 2009)

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These dysfunctions in our current system, for which the ACO is seen as a partial remedy, have been given much of the blame for our country's health care system costing 50% more as a percentage of GDP than any other in the world but ranking only 37th in overall health and 50th in life expectancy.⁸

Because of the crisis, drastic efforts at health care cost reform seem inevitable. President Obama stated it bluntly: "So let me be clear: If we do not control these costs, we will not be able to control the deficit."⁹ Private insurers see it, too. The President of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina recently stated: "Even if federal health overhaul is rejected by the Supreme Court or revamped by Congress, the market must continue to change. The system that brought us to this place is unsustainable. Employers who foot the bill for workers' health coverage are demanding that Blue Cross identify the providers with the highest quality outcomes and lowest costs."¹⁰

Flattening the cost curve is possible through the ACO's marketplace incentives without rationing care, imposing new taxes, or cutting provider reimbursement. Doing nothing is not an option, and all these alternatives appear unacceptable. In short, there is no "Plan B."

IV. Are ACOs Really Coming?

A. If They Repeal Health Reform, Won't This Go Away?

No. Federal health reform has three prongs: Expand Coverage (individual and employer mandates, no pre-existing condition exclusions, etc.), Fraud Control, and Waste Controls (ACOs, bundled payments, value-based purchasing, CMS Innovation Center, etc.). Many experts think that expanding coverage into our broken system has made health care even more unsustainable. However, as noted, the cost curves, even without health reform, will bankrupt our resources, and the value-based reimbursement movement was well underway before the federal legislation was passed. Increasing awareness of problems with the fee-for-service system has resulted in a growing number of initiatives that have common features of accountability at the medical community level, transparency to the public, flexibility to match local strengths to value-enhancement opportunities, and shifting to paying for value, not volume.

B. Isn't This Capitation Revisited?

You may fairly ask, "Isn't this the 'next big thing' to save health care, like capitation? Won't it fizzle away like that did?"

ACOs with shared savings are unlike capitation in several crucial ways. First, the payments are commonly only bonus payments in addition to fee for service payments.

⁸ World Health Organization, *World Health Statistics* 2009.

⁹ President Barack Obama, interview excerpt, July 23, 2009.

¹⁰ Brad Wilson, President of BlueCross BlueShield of North Carolina, *The News & Observer* (January 29, 2011).

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In the shared savings only models, there is no downside risk. Second, vital administrative capabilities, data measurement capability, identified common metrics, severity adjustment, and electronic health information exchange sophistication were not present in the capitation era.

Strategic Note: Though many experts propose that newly-formed ACOs assume financial risk through financial penalties, or partial or whole capitation, the 15 years clinical integration experience of this author strongly suggests that ACOs TRY NOT TO ACCEPT DOWNSIDE RISK UNTIL THEY HAVE THREE CONSECUTIVE YEARS OF MEETING BUDGET ESTIMATES.¹¹ There are just too many new partners, roles, moving parts, untested data metrics, and variables beyond the control of the ACO. Even taking a smaller share of the savings pool to recognize the absence of downside risk is preferred to accepting the responsibility of unanticipated medical expenses without the tools to control them. Having some “skin in the game” is clearly a logical way to incentivize accountability for providing value, but thrusting that on an unready health care system could do more harm than good.

C. Can't I Wait Until Things Get Clearer?

With hospitals and physicians having lots of other things on their plates and this bearing a resemblance to other reforms that never quite panned out, a wait-and-see attitude might at first seem reasonable. However, as the next chapter describes, successful ACO creation will require deep transformational change. The changes will have less to do with infrastructure and technology than culture. This is equally true in integrated systems with a fully-employed medical staff, as it is with other models. “Given the major cultural differences between hospitals and physicians, achieving clinical integration is one of the most difficult challenges that either party will ever undertake...Organizations that have not yet started down this path in earnest will need to move much more aggressively to prepare for the post fee-for-service world.”¹² You cannot wait to plan. Being unprepared is not an option. But there is a difference between having a plan and implementing a plan. If you are a hospital CEO or in a particular specialty you may want to wait until value-based reimbursement has reached the tipping point relative to fee for service before you “pull the trigger” in implementing your plan.

V. What Are The Essential Elements Of A Successful ACO?

There are eight essential elements of any successful ACO. All eight are required. You cannot skip a step. Because element one is not as objectively verifiable, it is very counterintuitive that the most vital element is by far the most difficult element to obtain will be creation of an interdependent culture of mutual accountability committed to higher quality and patient satisfaction at the lowest cost. “[C]linical transformation has less to do with technical capabilities and more with the ability to effect cultural change.”¹³

¹¹ The Final Rule was substantially revised from the proposed regulations in that a new ACO had the option in the first term of the MSSP not to accept risk, whereas under the proposed regulations CMS would mandate acceptance of risk for the third year of the initial three-year contract. 76 Fed. Reg. 19643.

¹² Gary Edmiston and David Wofford, *Physician Alignment: The Right Strategy; the Right Mindset*, Healthcare Financial Management Association (December 1, 2010).

¹³ *Id.*

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The Eight Essential Elements of a Successful ACO



A. Essential Element No. 1: Culture of Teamwork – Integration



The most important element, yet the one most difficult to attain, is a team-oriented culture with a deeply-held shared commitment to reorganize care to achieve higher quality at lower cost. A fully-functional ACO will catalyze the transformation of health delivery. “While strong hospital-physician alignment has always been a cornerstone of success, the necessary degree of future collaboration, partnership, and risk-sharing will dwarf what has come before it. Hospitals and physicians will have to recognize, embrace, and leverage their growing interdependence to create organizational structures and incentive models that are strategically aligned and mutually rewarding.”¹⁴

1. **Challenges for Physicians.** Physician attitudes favor autonomy and individualism over collaboration. These attitudes are inculcated in clinical training and reinforced daily in care delivery. Reimbursement rewards an individualistic “eat what you kill” mentality. Physicians need to understand that the level of involvement needed to effect changes in quality and cost is much different than just banding together for contracting purposes. Physicians will have to be willing to change utilization, referral, and care-management patterns. In many settings, specialists will need to release primary control of patient care decision-making to the Medical Home primary care physician.

¹⁴ *Toward Accountable Care*, The Advisory Board Company (2010).

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Physicians are justifiably cynical about prior “next best things,” such as HMOs, gate-keeping, and capitation, and have little experience with, or time for, organizational-level strategic planning. But, “[I]f providers do not change their decision-making and behavior, ACOs will go the way of most PHOs and IPAs...to the bone yard. More importantly, the healthcare crisis will persist, and more drastic solutions will be mandated.”¹⁵

2. Challenges for Hospitals. Will hospitals be willing to embrace a true ACO structure, which will likely drive down hospitalization? Will they be willing to distribute shared savings as intended, to incentivize and reward those who created it through high-performance care delivery and improved coordination, or will they try to take any savings dollars “off the top” to make up for the lost revenue from the reduction in avoidable hospitalizations and readmissions? Will the increased market share from joining an ACO make up for the lost revenue? Exacerbating these business risks for sharing governance with physicians and committing without reservation to an orientation of higher quality and lower costs, is a deeper cultural barrier: control. Hospitals are complex organizations, and a degree of control over operations and direction has been historically important for their viability.

“The most significant challenge of becoming accountable is not forming an organization, it is forging one.”¹⁶

Strategic Note: Tips on How to Create a Collaborative Culture:

- **Champions.** Vision comes first, but to sell that vision, you need physician leaders able to articulate a clear and compelling vision of change. They need to be champions of the transformational changes needed. As few as one, and rarely more than five, are needed. If a hospital is involved, the CEO needs to show commitment to the shared vision.
- **Governance Structure.** The structure must have meaningful input from the various parties to have status and credibility. It must exhibit shared control. Management teams can be pairings of physicians with hospital administrators. As noted, shared governance is such a point of emphasis that the Final Rule includes that phrase in the definition of “Accountable Care Organization.”¹⁷
- **Incentives Drive Alignment.** “[I]f incentives are correctly aligned, organic innovations to solve other problems can and will engage.... Anticipated early versions of ACO payment incentives are likely to be directionally correct but unlikely to be sufficient to create the needed burning platform.”¹⁸ Compensation plans for hospital-employed physicians must not be limited to individual productivity, but also have incentives for accountability for success of the ACO team.

¹⁵ Phillip L. Roning, *Becoming Accountable*, HFMA Compendium—Contemplating the ACO Opportunity, Appendix (November 2010), p. 40.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ 76 Fed. Reg. 67974.

¹⁸ Ann Robinow, *Accountable Care News*, The Top 3 Obstacles to ACO Implementation, (December 2010).

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- **“Spiral of Success.”** The following strategy could help meld team culture: An early pilot project for your ACO should be consistent with the new vision, led by champions and cut across specialty and department lines. A multi-disciplinary team decides how to collect and share data in new ways to facilitate this care initiative. The data, in paper or electronic format, is available at the point of care. Quality goes up and there is a savings pool. New team habits begin to emerge. Small scale is OK, but it must succeed, so the “spiral of success” can start. Trust goes up and buy-in for the next collaboration will occur more quickly.
- **Employment Not a Panacea.** Isn't the most obvious path to integration through hospital employment? This is a feasible approach if the parties have worked together in the past and there is a pre-existing level of trust and respect. This will not work if there are not shared goals and the control and financial incentive issues are not resolved. “Current trends in physician employment represent neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for true integration; value-added integration does not necessarily require large-scale physician employment and simply signing contracts does not ensure progress toward more effective care coordination.”¹⁹

B. Essential Element No. 2: Primary Care Physicians



1. **What Is the Role of Primary Care In ACOs?** As discussed in detail in Section V.G. below, the highest-impact targets identified for ACOs lie in the following areas: (a) prevention and wellness; (b) chronic disease management; (c) reduced hospitalizations; (d) improved care transitions across the current fragmented system; and (e) multi-specialty co-management of complex patients. Primary care can be drivers in all of these categories.

Harold Miller of the Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform concluded, “it seems clear that, in order to be accountable for the health and healthcare of a broad population of patients, an Accountable Care Organization must have one or more primary care practices playing a central role.”²⁰ He envisions different levels of ACOs, with the core Level One consisting primarily of primary care practices. Level Two would include select specialists and potentially hospitals. As the diverse patient populations are included, Level Three expands to more specialists and facilities, and Level Four includes public health and community social services. As noted, primary care is the only provider or health care facility mandated for inclusion to qualify for PPACA's ACO Shared Savings Program.

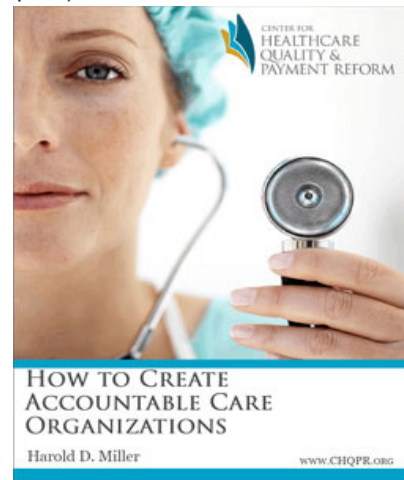
¹⁹ *Toward Accountable Care*, The Advisory Board Company (2010).

²⁰ Harold D. Miller, *How to Create Accountable Care Organizations*, Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform, p. 8, (September 2009).

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2. **What Are the Roles of Specialists In ACOs?** It is becoming clear that specialists are going to serve important roles in ACOs. Given the opportunities for ACOs listed in Section V.B.1. above, specialists should see roles in Medical Home coordination on diagnosis and treatment, transitions across settings, reducing avoidable hospitalizations, and in multi-specialty complex patient management. Inpatient specialists can tackle hospital through-put, minimizing avoidable adverse events and readmissions, and quality improvements. Specialists intent on preserving volume at the expense of best practices have no role in an ACO.

3. **What Are the Roles of Hospitals In ACOs?** Hospitals are logical ACO partners for several reasons: Patients will need hospitalization, hospitals have extensive administrative and HIT infrastructure, ACOs are consistent with their missions, and hospitals are often a medical community's natural organizational hub. But the typical ACOs tend to reduce hospitalizations. As Mr. Miller observes, "the interests of primary care physicians and hospitals in many communities will not only be unaligned, but will be in opposition to one another."²¹ A litmus test for hospital membership (or whether to join an ACO that includes a hospital) is whether it is committed to overall increased savings, improved quality, and improved patient satisfaction for patient populations, even if hospitalization rates are reduced. It is also unacceptable if a hospital permanently seeks to capture most of the shared savings "off the top" to make up for lost revenue. A hospital at over-capacity should not have this conflict. Moreover, many hospitals see full institutional commitment to accountable care as the best way to prepare for the future, maximize their fair share of the shared savings dollar, and grow market share. Once the tipping point of the shift from payment for volume to payment for value has been reached, these conflicts should dissolve.



In summary, because primary care will drive so many of an ACO's most high-yielding initiatives, it is an essential element of a lasting and successful ACO. "Accountable care absolutely must be about improving and maintaining the health of a population of patients and not just controlling costs. It must be about proactive and preventive care and not reactive care. It must be about outcomes and not volume or processes. It must be about leveraging the value of primary care and the elements of the Patient-Centered Medical Home."²²

²¹ *Id.*, p. 15.

²² Terry McGeeney, M.D., *The Patient-Centered Medical Home and the Accountable Care Organization*, <http://transformed.com/CEOREports/PCMH-and-ACO.cfm>, (2010).

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C. Essential Element No. 3: Adequate Administrative Capabilities



What Kind of Organization Can Be an ACO? The very label “accountable care organization” tends to convey an impression that an ACO must be a particular type of organization. In retrospect, it probably should have been called “Accountable Care System.” **It is about function, not form.** The NCQA’s ACO criteria look to core competencies and infrastructure to implement them, but are “agnostic to organizational structure (i.e., whether or not it is led by a multi-specialty group, hospital, or independent practice association).”²³ Similarly, a wide array of organizations may become eligible for CMS Shared Savings Program under PPACA and the Final Rule:²⁴ group practice arrangements, networks of practices, joint ventures between providers and hospitals, hospitals employing providers, and other approved structures. There are three essential infrastructure functional capabilities: (1) performance measurement, (2) financial administration, and (3) clinical direction. A legal entity of some sort is necessary, and a number of choices are available. The form ultimately chosen should be driven by what most readily facilitates achievement of the functional needs of the ACO initiatives in your community. The ultimate goals of accountable care are to improve patient outcomes and patient satisfaction while also achieving greater cost efficiencies. The key to achieving this goal is enhanced coordination of care among diverse providers through the application of evidence-based clinical protocols and transparent measurement and reporting. **“While ACO formation and ongoing structural, operational, and legal issues related to ACOs are important, it is this transformation in clinical care that must remain the overriding focus of ACO development.”**²⁵

What Are Key Legal Issues Affecting ACOs? ACOs require collaboration, referrals, reductions in unnecessary care, and sharing of revenues among sometime competitors. All of these characteristics, and more, in furtherance of health policy, also happen to raise a number of challenging legal-compliance issues for a body of state and federal health care law largely premised upon the fee-for-service model. Adaptations of the most problematic laws and regulations are underway. On October 20, 2011, the Departments of Health and Human Services, Treasury, and Justice, and the Federal Trade Commission jointly released federal policies concerning implementing the MSSP in order to provide guidance. A properly configured ACO should be successful in navigating this legal minefield. The principal bodies of law affecting ACOs are:

- Antitrust
- Anti-kickback
- Stark
- Civil Monetary Penalties Law

²³ NCQA, pp. 7-8.

²⁴ 76 Fed. Reg. 67975.

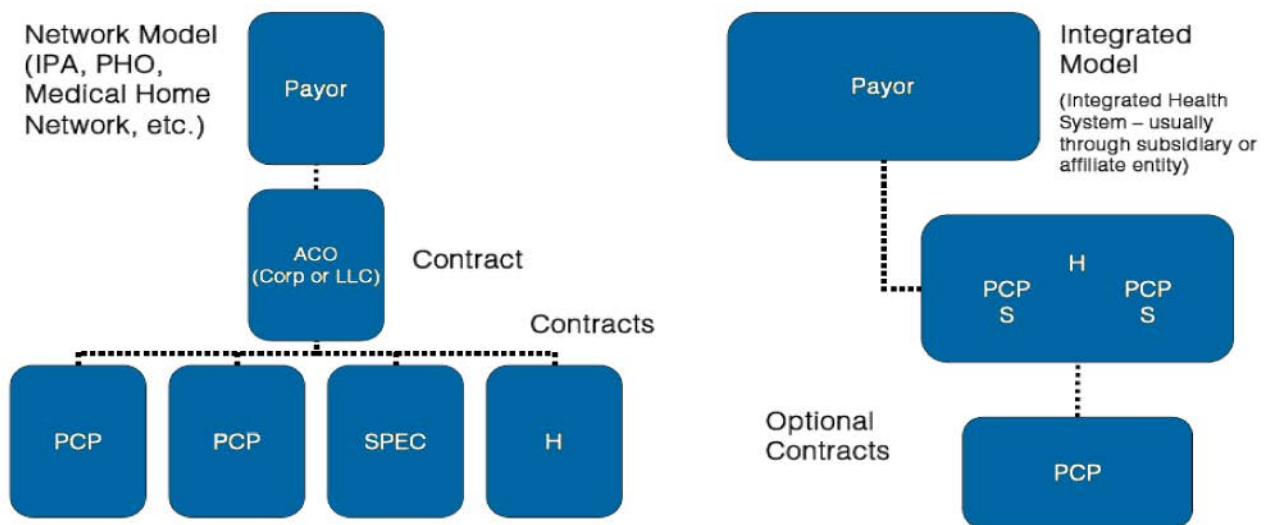
²⁵ Doug Hastings, Accountable Care News (December 2010), p. 6.

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- Tax
- HIPAA
- Malpractice
- Corporate Practice of Medicine
- Insurance
- Intellectual Property
- State Self-Referral Laws
- Business Law

For a detailed legal analysis, please review the “Accountable Care Legal Guide.”

Possible Organizational Forms



1. Network Model

a. **Independent Practice Associations (“IPAs”)** – An IPA is basically an umbrella legal entity, usually an LLC, for-profit corporation or nonprofit organization, with physician participation contracts with hospital-employed and independent physician practices. Payors contract with the IPA. These structures became familiar in the fee-for-service and capitation eras, and the form is still suitable for the accountable care era. However, the IPA now needs to have ACO-level infrastructure as described in this Guide. It is particularly dependent on robust health information exchange, as the continuum of care is more “virtual” because the providers are independent. The

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participation agreements are different, too. The provider agrees to undertake the responsibilities agreed upon by the ACO and accept some type of performance-based incentive, like shared savings, in addition to fee-for-service. It can have any combination of specialists, primary care, hospital, and tertiary care participating contracts. An IPA is owned by physicians. Legal issues of note in IPAs involve antitrust, self-referral, insurance regulation, HIPAA, malpractice, and the Stark law.

b. **Physician/Hospital Organization (“PHO”)** – The PHO is very similar to an IPA, but the main difference is that it is co-owned and governed by physicians and a hospital or health system and includes a hospital participation contract. The same requirements and caveats apply.

c. **Medical Home-Centric Model** – Under this variation, an umbrella entity is owned by Medical Home practice members or networks. It contracts with payors, initially for the medical-home-related primary care services, but includes accountable care financial arrangements and performance measurement capabilities. It broadens the scope of initiatives and patient populations by adding select specialists and hospitals through contractual arrangements. These may be sub-ACO arrangements whereby the contract is with a PHO or hospital ACO. The same requirements and caveats of the other Network Model forms apply. Community Care of North Carolina is an example of a statewide confederation of 14 Medical Home-Centric Networks.

2. **Integrated ACO Structure** – With this variation, the hospital, health system, foundation, or multi-specialty clinic employs, rather than contracts with, the physician. It may own, capitalize, and control the ACO, with physicians on advisory committees. The HIT and other infrastructure is within the controlling entity. It may have contracts with independent providers and facilities if necessary to round out the breadth, depth, and reach of services needed to accomplish its initiatives.

D. **Essential Element No. 4: Adequate Financial Incentives**



1. **Isn’t This the Same As Insurance?** No. An insurance company assumes the financial risk of whether a person gets ill or has an accident requiring medical care. Accountable care risk is accountability for higher performance treatment of patients once they become ill. This gets fuzzy when one remembers that the ACO will be responsible for an entire patient population, especially as it assumes more risk, as in full capitation. However, this distinction is why the ACO performance expectations need to be severity-adjusted.

2. **What Are the Types of Financial Incentive Models for ACOs?** There are three tiers: upside-bonus-only shared savings; a hybrid of limited-upside and limited-downside shared savings and penalty; and full-upside and full-downside capitation.

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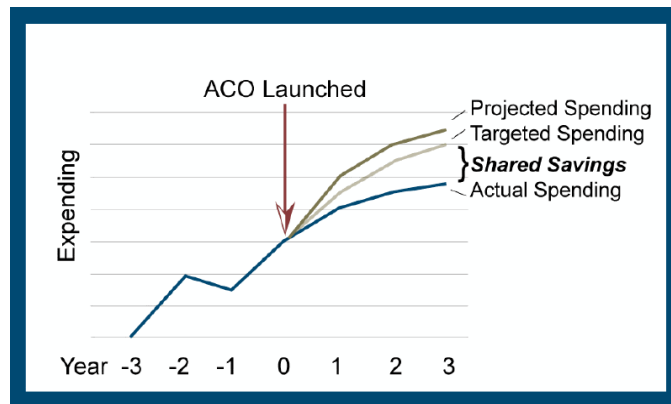
a. **Shared Savings** – If quality and patient satisfaction are enhanced or maintained and there are savings relative to the predicted costs for the assigned patient population, then a portion (commonly 50% according to some surveys and the MSSP Final Rule) of those savings is shared with the ACO. This is stacked on top of the provider’s fee-for-service payments. To maximize incentivization, the savings pool should be divided in proportion to the level of contribution of each ACO participant. This aligns incentives of all ACO participants to keep patients as well as possible, and if ill, to receive optimum care in a team environment across the care continuum. If primary care has especially high medical home management responsibility, this may be accompanied by the addition of a flat per member/per month payment.

Some of the savings pool distributions should be used to maintain the ACO infrastructure, but as much as possible should go to reward providers and facilities for the extra time and attention devoted to patient management and technology investments. As mentioned, it should not go to pay affected physicians or hospitals for reduced revenues under fee-for-service for reductions in volume.

A strength of this model is that it is easy to understand and transition to, since it builds upon the familiar fee-for-service system. That is also its weakness, since fee-for-service still rewards volume, not value. This shared savings model has been criticized as being “asymmetric” or “one-sided,” with no consequence if there are higher costs or no care improvement. Another problem is that there is by necessity a lag time to measure the “delta,” or the difference between the actual costs and the expected costs, so the ACO is uncertain whether there will be revenues. The delay saps the incentivization to adhere to the ACO’s best practices and coordination.

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The Shared Savings Model



*Courtesy of the Brookings Institution

Strategic Note 1: How to Calculate Shared Savings. Although the concept is simple – the ACO gets 50% of the difference between what the costs for the population turned out to be versus what the costs would have been if the ACO were not in place – DO NOT try to do this by comparing your population costs year-to-year. It might work the first year, but will be inappropriate after that. Having to beat your performance from the prior year, every year, is like calling an Olympic medalist a failure if she does not break her world record the next time out. In some CMS demonstration projects, relatively unmanaged counties in other parts of the country were picked as the control populations. Another way that works is to use an actuary that can predict the medical costs for your region or comparable community and use that actuarially valid projected amount as your unmanaged “comparable.” A variation of this latter approach has been chosen by CMS for calculation of the MSSP savings.²⁶

Strategic Note 2: Be Patient Before Taking on Risk. Do not repeat the disaster of the '90s, when providers took on risk without proper technology, infrastructure, best practices, or experience. We recommend that you come within 5% ± of your predicted costs for three consecutive years before leaving the shared-savings upside-only model. You may have unexpected costs over which you have no control. You will likely want to improve your Health Information Exchange, include relevant data elements, and see which of your ACO providers “get it.” In our experience, fears are overblown that lack of downside risk will deter performance improvement. To the contrary, a meaningful bonus payment is very motivating, as much as a recognition of and respect for the clinical leadership of the physicians as it is for the benefit of dollars involved. Individual distributions that differ based on performance determined by peers is also a “grade” that high-achieving individuals work hard to earn.

²⁶ 76 Fed. Reg. 67985-67988.

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b. **Savings Bonus Plus Penalty** – As with the shared savings model, providers receive shared savings for managing costs and hitting quality and satisfaction benchmarks, but also will be liable for expenses that exceed spending targets. This model is called “symmetric” or “two-sided” and the bonus potential is increased to balance the accountability for exceeding pre-set goals. Fee-for-service is retained. This resembles the “two-sided” model mentioned in the Final Rule.²⁷

c. **Capitation** – A range of partial capitation and full capitation models are possible. Fee-for-service payments are replaced by flat payments plus potential bonuses and penalties. Only seasoned and truly clinically integrated ACOs should attempt this level of risk. Yes, the upside is higher, but the disasters of the '90s should not be forgotten.

3. Is This the Same as Bundled Payment or Episode of Care Payment? ACO incentives can be aligned with these and other payment experiments under consideration. An “episode of care” is a single amount to cover all the services provided to a patient during a single episode of care. When that episode payment covers providers who would have been paid separately under fee-for-service, that is a “bundled payment.” Such a payment mechanism that excludes payment for treatment of avoidable readmission or hospital-acquired infections motivates better care. These approaches do not incentivize prevention and medical-home coordination to avoid the episode in the first place.

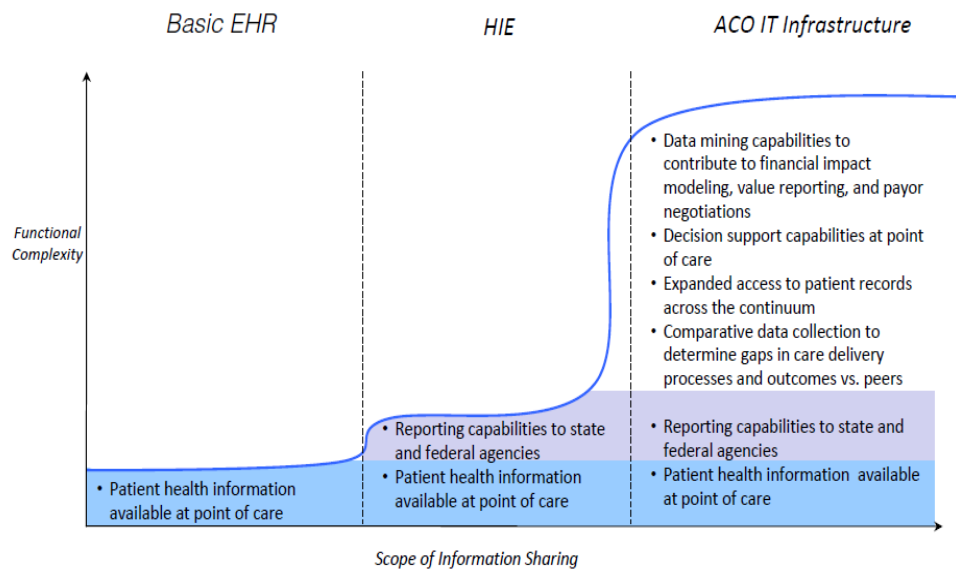
4. “Meaningful Use” Regulations Incentives. We include the “Meaningful Use” payments as an ACO financial incentive because the basic Health Information Exchange within your ACO will likely qualify the ACO’s providers for the Phase Two and Phase Three “Meaningful Use” incentives.²⁸ If your ACO can go ahead and establish its data flow needs relatively soon as outlined in this ACO Guide, you stand a good chance that the federal government will help finance the ACO’s HIT needs. See Section V.E. below for more detail.

²⁷ 76 Fed. Reg. 67986-67987.

²⁸ 75 Fed. Reg. 44314 (July 28, 2010).

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E. Essential Element No. 5: Health Information Technology and Data



1. **What Data?** ACO data is usually a combination of quality, efficiency, and patient-satisfaction measures. It will usually have outcomes and process measures. Nationally-accepted benchmarks are emerging. There are three categories of data needs for an ACO:

a. **Baseline Data** – This is often overlooked. To compare anything, there needs to be a beginning reference point. Can you collect costs and quality data? Who owns it now? Who collects it? Do you trust them to be accurate and objective? Use it to perform a “gap analysis”: Where are your local quality and cost numbers outliers to the ideal? This tells you where your “low-hanging” fruit may be. Match those outlier opportunity areas with the particular strengths of the provider array of your ACO and you have your prioritized initiatives or targets.

b. **Performance Data** – In the value-based reimbursement era, it will not be enough to provide exceptional cost-effective care; you must prove it. A practical way to determine your ACO’s needed performance data is to start by selecting the ACO’s targeted initiative as mentioned above. Then select from emerging nationally recognized quality and efficiency metrics, if they apply. Even if they do apply, convene a multi-specialty committee of clinicians to vet their clinical validity. This committee will recommend performance benchmarks from scratch if national standards are not yet available for all of the care pathways of your initiative. They should address quality, patient satisfaction, and efficiency. They need to be severity-adjusted. Obviously, if and when a third-party payor, including CMS, sets the performance benchmarks, they should be part of the performance array. Many payors want to allow local flexibility and clinical leadership in metric-setting.

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Who collects the data? Are there variables outside of your control affecting your performance scores (i.e., patient non-compliance)? What financial incentives/penalties are tied to each?

c. **Data As a Clinical Tool** – Once the ACO targeted care initiatives are selected, the best practices across the care continuum will be determined. The appropriate ACO committee will then usually “blow up” each pathway into each component and assign clinical leadership, decision support, data prompts, and embed relevant clinical data into each step at the point-of-care. ACOs are discussing virtual workstations and data dashboards. Coordination with downstream providers will be optimized with the real-time sharing of upstream care results and scheduling.

Strategic Notes: (1) The ACO should periodically internally grade itself against the performance benchmarks to create a constant quality/efficiency/satisfaction improvement loop. This not only will hone the contributions of the ACO initiatives, but also will prepare it to increase its financial rewards once the performance results drive a savings pool or bundled payments. Gaps in care should be flagged and addressed before your compensation depends on it. Clearly, clinically valid, accurately collected, severity-adjusted, and properly benchmarked data are essential for any compensation model based on performance. (2) Data that reflects a track record of high performance serves as a bargaining tool when reimbursement is being negotiated, even in fee-for-service. (3) Use data first to target the “low-hanging fruit,” high-impact, value-add initiatives in your area best suited to your specialty or facility. Next, use data to collect evidence of your performance. There will be specific baseline, performance, and clinical data elements needed for each participant to meet objectives, maximize their measured contribution, and thus reap a meaningful reward from the savings pool.

d. **The MSSP Final Rule Provides Details** – Down from 65 in the Proposed Rule, the Final Rule requires reporting on 33 measures across your domains: patient/caregiver experience; care coordination; patient safety; preventative health; and at-risk population/frail elderly health. The goals of measure setting include seeking a mix of standards, processes, outcomes, and patient experience measures, severity adjusted and, to the extent practicable, nationally endorsed by a stakeholder organization.

e. **HIE Capability** – Your ACO will need Health Information Exchange (“HIE”) capabilities sufficient to move this data across the continuum in a meaningful way. This HIE is aligned with the Meaningful Use regulations. It will need to be able to aggregate data from multiple sources into user-friendly formats with decision support and relevant data that follows the patient to maximize chances of success in the ACO’s targeted initiatives. It needs to minimize the data collection burden on workflows.

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F. Essential Element No. 6: Best Practices Across the Continuum of Care

Another essential element of a successful ACO is the ability to translate evidence-based medical principles into actionable best practices across the continuum of care for the selected targeted initiative or initiatives. An ACO may start out with a single patient population (i.e., morbidly obese patients) or disease-state (i.e., diabetes).

The five identified high-impact target areas for ACO initiatives are:

- Prevention and wellness;
- Chronic disease (75% of all U.S. health care spending, much of it preventable);
- Reduced hospitalizations;
- Care transitions (across our fragmented system); and
- Multi-specialty care coordination of complex patients.

“The best bet for achieving returns from integration is to prioritize initiatives specifically targeting waste and inefficiency caused by fragmentation in today’s delivery system, unnecessary spending relating to substandard clinical coordination, aggravated with the complexity of navigating episodes of care, and unwanted variations in clinical outcomes driven by lack of adherence to best clinical practice.”²⁹

As discussed earlier in Section V.B., the richest “target fields” from this array will vary by specialty and type of facility. Looking at these suggested initiatives, it is no wonder why primary care is emphasized as key for ACOs, since they could play a significant role in every area. The ACO should match its strengths against the gaps in care in the ACO’s market to find the proverbial “low-hanging fruit.”

G. Essential Element No. 7: Patient Engagement



Patient engagement is another essential element. Without it, an ACO will not fully meet its potential. Unfortunately, many of today’s health care consumers erroneously believe that more is better, especially when they are not “paying” for it, insurance is. Patient noncompliance is a problem, especially regarding chronic diseases and lifestyle management. It is difficult to accept a compensation model based on input on improved patient population health when that is dramatically affected by a variable outside of your control, patient adherence. Currently, asking a patient to be a steward of his or her own care puts a fee-for-service payor at a competitive disadvantage. But patient engagement is part of patient-centeredness, which is required by PPACA for an ACO to qualify for CMS’ Shared Savings Program.³⁰

²⁹ *Toward Accountable Care*, The Advisory Board Company (2010)

³⁰ Section 3022 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (42 U.S.C. §§ 1395, et seq.). See also 76 Fed. Reg. 67976.

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What Can an ACO Do to Engage Patients?

Better information at a societal level and also at the medical home point of care.

- **The Patient Compact** – Some ACOs, such as the Geisinger Clinic, engage the patient through a compact, or agreement. It may involve a written commitment by the patient to be responsible for his or her own wellness or chronic care management, coupled with rewards for so doing, education, tools, self-care modules, and shared decision-making empowerment. The providers will need to embrace the importance of patient involvement and hold up their end of the engagement bargain.
- **Benefit Differentials for Lifestyle Choices** – The financial impact of many volitional patient lifestyle choices is actuarially measurable. A logical consequence of the patient choice could be a benefit or financial differential reflecting at least partially these avoidable health care costs.

H. Essential Element No. 8: Scale-Sufficient Patient Population



It is OK, even desirable, to start small; to “walk before you run,” so to speak. However, it is often overlooked that there needs to be a minimal critical mass of patients to justify the time and infrastructure investment for the ACO. PPACA’s Shared Savings Program requires that the ACO have a minimum of 5,000 beneficiaries assigned to it.

Strategic Note: Some ACOs commence activities through a single pilot, or demonstration project, without a sustainable patient population scale. It can de-bug the initiative and test-run the ACO early enough to fix problems before ramping up. This must succeed, however. If it does, it will be much easier for the ACO champions to gain buy-in from others.



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The elements do come together and mesh. Culture dominates. Each one can be built. These are not mysterious. They are doable. It will be hard. Once the ACO organizers embrace the opportunity in this change, achieving all of the elements for sustainable success is quite feasible. In addition, if you are evaluating a previously organized ACO, there are clear indicators regarding these essential elements that will predict reliably its likelihood of success.

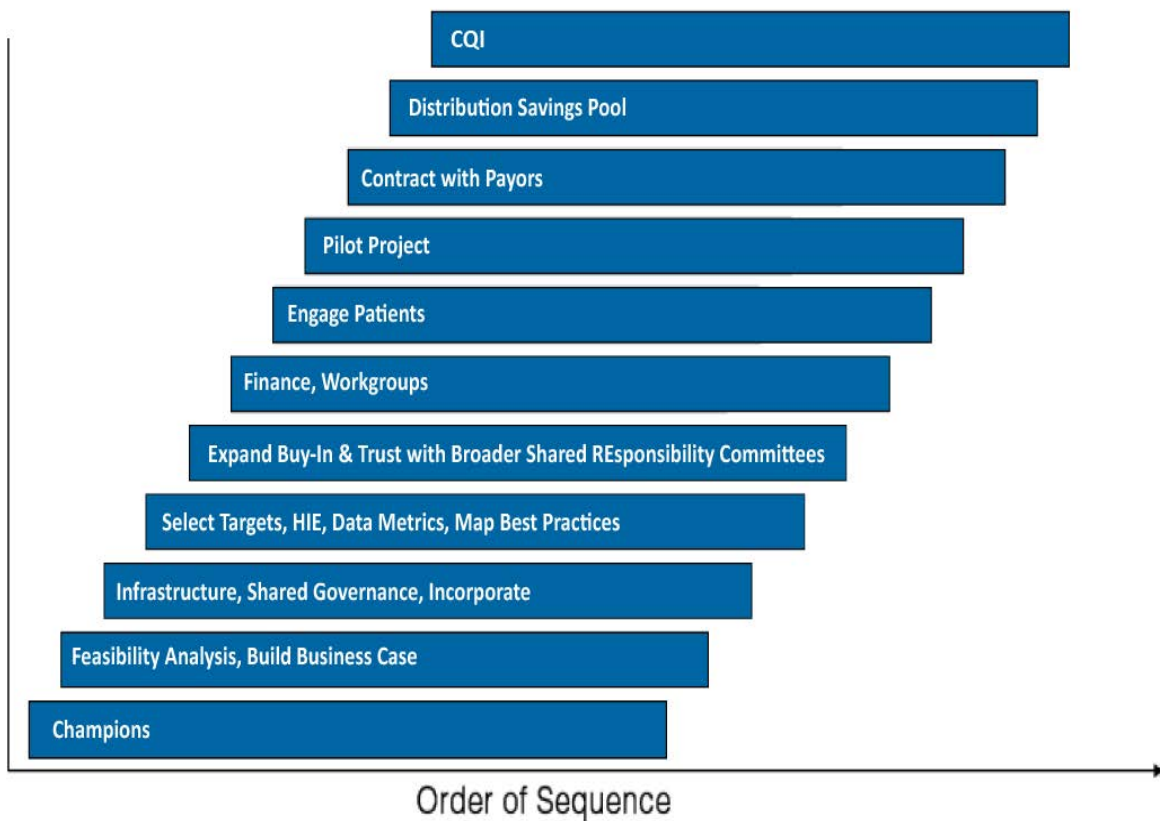
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VI. Successful Implementation – A Step-By-Step Guide

A. Where Do I Start?

OK, you now may be saying: “I know what an ACO is, why it is important, and how to identify ones that will succeed. However, how do I build one? Where do I start? I know where I need to go now, but how do I get there?” The creation of an ACO follows basic business planning and start-up principles. Expert advice on ACO development is uniform. The following is a step-by-step guide to building an ACO.

B. Step-By-Step Guide



1. **Informed Champions** – Perhaps even ahead of this first step may be that there needs to be some ACO information available to plant the seed of awareness with a few local champions. These champions, whether hospital CEO, family physician, or neurosurgeon, will need to invest their “sweat equity” to get up to speed (the main purpose of this ACO Guide). The champions need to reach beyond silos and see whether cultural compatibility is possible.

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2. Strategy Formulation/Gap Analysis – Next, a small core group should honestly assess where they are and where they need to go. What is the target market (i.e., chronic disease, Medicaid, the elderly)? Does an ACO make sense? What do we target? How do we make sure this is fair and successful so that we get buy-in? Some experts recommend a phased approach starting with primary care, then adding select specialists and hospitals around targeted high-impact initiatives, then a comprehensive panel, and then, finally, including public health and social services. Other experts recommend matching the natural strengths of the ACO with the greatest gaps in care for the local area. Then they would have the ACO model a strategic business case, to create a roadmap to development. How will it achieve all of the 8 Essential Elements? Keep the team very small at this stage.

3. Clear Vision – The organizing group needs to have credibility and will need to unite around a clear and compelling shared vision.

4. Clinical Integration – Through shared decision-making and champion leadership, build capabilities of a clinically integrated organization. Review the plan for presence of the 8 Essential Elements listed in Chapter V. The TACC is creating specialty-specific strategic toolkits to assist each specialty in building in capabilities and programs to optimize that specialty's contribution to, and thus reward from, an ACO. Please see Part Two, Section II, for the completed toolkits. If yours is not present, please contact Melanie Phelps at mphelps@ncmedsoc.org to see how you and your specialty society can partner with the TACC to develop a state-of-the-art toolkit.

- a. Start with your initial targeted initiatives.
- b. From them, establish best practices for the continuum of care for all providers involved with that type of patient.
- c. “Blow up” the best practices into component parts and assign clinical leadership responsibility for each.
- d. Identify which clinical data sets and decision support tools are needed at each step.
- e. Assign performance metrics and financial accountability for same.
- f. Determine HIT technical requirements.
- g. Determine best financial tools to incentivize desired behavior by all involved (i.e., share savings with predetermined performance benchmarks and distribution methodology). The TACC has engaged the law firm of Smith Anderson Blount Dorsett Mitchell & Jernigan, LLP and the health care valuation firm of HORNE, LLP to develop a multi-based shared savings distribution model for use by ACOs with multiple specialties. It will be made available by the TACC.

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5. **Structural Foundation** – Choose the legal entity approach and formal governance structure most appropriate to your culture and business plan. It must be driven by the form most likely for the success of the ACO, not controlled by success for any particular stakeholder. Establish membership criteria and a shared decision-making structure. Design and undertake training. Develop payor strategy and contract terms. Do “ROI” predictive modeling to estimate savings and quality benefits. Create credible value talking points for all stakeholders. If you choose to participate in the Medicare Shared Savings Program, make sure you meet all the structural requirements, which are not onerous.
6. **Expand Buy-In** – Broaden structured involvement. Create a multi-disciplinary integration committee with HIT, best practices, patient engagement, and finance subcommittees.
7. **Accountability Function** – Develop data metrics, measurement capability, and sophisticated financial administration capabilities to manage financial shared savings distribution. Set performance targets. Normalize data. Make sure your performance-based incentives target your ACO objectives.
8. **Start Small** – Start with a demonstration or pilot project.
9. **Contract with Payors** – Once ready, contract to provide integrated accountable care services on a shared savings basis, at least initially, for your target patient population. The patient population scale must be adequate to achieve economies of scale. Consider a Medicare ACO starting in January of 2014 as part of a broader strategy. (See Part Two for a blueprint on applying to the Medicare ACO and Medicare ACO Advance Payment Model programs.
10. **Assess and Improve** – Assess results of the process. Make adaptations to create a constant quality improvement (“CQI”) loop. Collect and distribute the savings pool roughly in proportion to contributions to it.

VII. Conclusion

The Accountable Care Organization holds great promise to address many of the ills of America’s health care system. However, it will require new skill-sets, collaboration partners, technology, and systems. It will require a radically different approach to shared accountability. It is the goal of this ACO Guide to demystify ACOs for all stakeholders and to provide some tools and confidence to allow health care leaders to take prudent risks for greater success than they otherwise would have.

For more information on any aspect of this ACO Guide, please contact Julian (“Bo”) Bobbitt at either 919-821-6612 or bbobbitt@smithlaw.com. (www.smithlaw.com)

Part Two: The Rural Accountable Care Guide



The Rural Accountable Care Guide

I. Introduction

A. Purpose of this Guide

The companion *The Physician's Accountable Care Toolkit*® describes what it takes to create a successful ACO or Accountable Care Community and the steps to get there. Since it is fundamental that an ACO be a win/win for all involved, it applies whether one is a local health director, hospital administrator, caregiver or physician specialist. *The Rural Accountable Care Guide* on the other hand spells out the unique strategies most appropriate for rural settings.



B. Recap of *The Physician's Accountable Care Toolkit*®

1. **What Is an ACO?** – Former Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (“CMS”) Mark McClellan, M.D., Ph.D. described an ACO as follows: “ACOs consist of providers who are jointly held accountable for achieving measured quality improvements and reductions in the rate of spending growth. Our definition emphasizes that these cost and quality improvements must achieve overall per capita improvements in quality and cost, and that ACOs should have at least limited accountability for achieving these improvements while caring for a defined population of patients.”¹ Similarly, the National Committee for Quality Assurance (“NCQA”) included the following definition in its draft ACO criteria: “Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) are provider-based organizations that take responsibility for meeting the healthcare needs of a defined population with the goal of

¹ Mark McClellan, Director of the Engleberg Center for Health Care Reform at the Brookings Institution, *A National Strategy to Put Accountable Care Into Practice*, Health Affairs (May 2010), p. 983.

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simultaneously improving health, improving patient experiences, and reducing per capita costs, ... [T] here is emerging consensus that ACOs must include a group of physicians with a strong primary care base and sufficient other specialties that support the care needs of a defined population of patients. A well-run ACO should align the clinical and financial incentives of its providers.... ACOs will also need the administrative infrastructure to manage budgets, collect data, report performance, make payments related to performance, and organize providers around shared goals.”²

2. **This is Big, Different and Inevitable** – If we stay on the current spending glide path, by 2035 health care costs in this country will be more than the total of all tax and other revenues collected in our country, and by 2080, taxpayer funded health care will equal all of our governmental revenues, meaning that everything else—defense, roads, education—must be funded by borrowing. The other options are simply unthinkable: tax increases, rationing care or drastic reimbursement cuts. As a country, our health care costs are more than 50 percent more than in any other country, but we are now ranked 32nd in what we get for our investment. The Congressional Budget Office laid the groundwork for accountable care’s “pay-for-value” when it reported that much of the blame for our runaway health care costs should be placed on our fee-for-service payment system where “providers have a financial incentive to provide higher-intensity care in greater volume, which contributes to the fragmented delivery of care that currently exists.”

On April 16, 2015, Congress enacted the Medicare Access and Chip Reauthorization Act (“MACRA”), which will transform the way providers are paid for providing services to Medicare patients. This law was enacted to replace the Sustainable Growth Rate (“SGR”) formula. MACRA replaces the SGR with incentives for physicians to participate in Alternative Payment Models (“APMs”) such as ACOs. For example, physicians participating in a qualifying Medicare ACO will automatically receive compensation increases. These APMs aim to move physician payment from a fee-for-service model, which is employed currently, to a payment mechanism that more appropriately pays for value as opposed to rewarding only volume. Starting in 2019, those who do not participate in APMs will be subject to value payment adjustments under a new Merit-Based Incentive Payment System (“MIPS”). So even if you do nothing, you will be moved to a value payment model, but if you participate in a qualifying ACO, you receive compensation increases. Additionally MACRA requires the Department of Health and Human Services to distribute \$100 million in technical assistance to small practices attempting to transition to MIPS or APMs. Small practices are defined as those with 15 or fewer professionals. Priority to receive funds will be given to those in rural areas, health professional shortage areas, medically underserved areas and those with low composite scores.

² National Committee for Quality Assurance, [Accountable Care Organization \(ACO\) Draft 2011 Criteria](#), p. 3.

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Although Medicare is only one payer, previous trends have proven that ultimately, when the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (“CMS”) makes changes to payment policies, often many other private payers and Medicaid agencies also follow suit. The result of the passage of MACRA will accelerate changes to physician payment and care delivery currently underway.

No one knows better than rural health care providers that, in addition to fragmentation, duplication and “more is better” excess, there are significant unjustified variations in quality and costs of care for similar patient populations. Yet, when motivated providers collaborate to drive the highest quality outcomes and the lowest costs, they do. Wonderful things happen—the patient is happier, employers finally see a slackening of spiraling health care costs, physicians regain control of the physician-patient relationship, and there is “found money” in savings from squeezing out waste to reward them for their efforts.

Yes, reversing the way health care is paid for is big, and it will require significant change. But, physician-led accountable care is the best way to fix health care and provide physicians financial and professional reward. Rural providers, with their experience in population-based outreach, provide an indispensable foundation for the future success of any ACO.

C. What Are the Essential Elements of a Successful ACO?



There are eight essential elements of any successful ACO. All eight are required. You cannot skip a step. **As early ACO success and failure reports confirm, besides the obvious “deal killer” of no or inadequate financial incentives, by far the most important element for ACO success is the creation of an interdependent culture of mutual accountability committed to higher quality at the lowest cost.**

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- 1. Culture** – Full collaboration and true partnering among hospitals, physicians and other providers will drive success. This must be coupled with a buy-in to change habits to work in teams to drive value with a “win/win” population management philosophy. This is way, way out of physicians’ and hospital administrators’ comfort zones. Physicians love independence, autonomy and often just want to see patients. Administrators have heretofore succeeded through strong leadership direction and infrastructure control. **“The most significant challenge of becoming accountable is not forming an organization, it is in forging one.”**³ Culture keys are: champions, governance and advance planning for merit-incentives.
- 2. Primary Care Physicians** – When reviewing Element 6 below, the core role of primary care becomes clear. Prevention, wellness, care transition and patient coordination management are the “low-hanging fruit” for ACO improvements and savings and are all in primary care’s sweet spot. Primary care is the only sub-specialty required in Medicare’s ACO program. Sophisticated ACOs will thrive with hospitals, specialists and community health partners, but primary care, at least one-third of the total membership, will always be at the core.
- 3. Adequate Administrative Capabilities** – ACO structural, operational and legal considerations are essential, but are relatively straightforward. Developing the interdependent culture and commitment to clinical transformation across the full continuum of care is more elusive and should receive most of the ACO leadership’s attention. Ironically, because they are objective, readily measurable and more familiar, structural, operational, legal and HIT issues often consume the bulk of planning time, leaving the subjective and “invisible” culture and care transformation issues behind.
- 4. Adequate Financial Incentives** – “[I]f incentives are correctly aligned, organic innovations to solve other problems can and will engage.... Anticipated early versions of ACO payment incentives are likely to be directionally correct but unlikely to be sufficient to create the needed burning platform.”⁴ One rule of thumb may be found in antitrust law, where the behavior changing tipping point in health care is considered to be roughly 20 percent of total compensation. Fifty percent savings for ACOs not taking downside financial risk is a fairly common measure and viewed by most as adequate.
- 5. Health Information Technology and Data** – Every successful ACO will run on a sound technology platform with meaningful, actionable data at the point of care, transferable across the continuum, and available in aggregate form to prioritize ACO initiatives, measure performance, and report to payers and health care regulators. In contrast to fee-for-service with its demands of physician time and lack of incentives to log and study data, ACO physicians clamor for such information. These

³ Phillip L. Rowing, *Becoming Accountable*, HFMP Compendium Contemplating the ACO Opportunity, Appendix, p. 40 (Nov. 2010).

⁴ Ann Robinow, *Accountable Care News*, The Top 30 Obstacles to ACO Implementation, (Dec. 2010).

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HIT and data capabilities need not be prohibitively expensive nor mandate linking EMRs. Sometimes a “Chevy” will get you where you need to go just about as well as a “Cadillac.”

6. **Best Practices Across the Continuum of Care** – The five identified high-impact target areas for ACO initiatives are:

- Prevention and wellness;
- Chronic disease (75 percent of all U.S. health care spending, much of it preventable);
- Reduced hospitalizations;
- Care transitions (across our fragmented system); and
- Multispecialty care coordination of complex patients.

“The best bet for achieving returns from integration is to prioritize initiatives specifically targeting waste and inefficiency caused by fragmentation in today’s delivery system, unnecessary spending relating to substandard clinical coordination, aggravated by the complexity of navigating episodes of care, and unwanted variations in clinical outcomes driven by lack of adherence to best clinical practice.”⁵

7. **Patient Engagement** – How can your compensation be based on outcomes when the patient is not “in the game?” Patient engagement and patient-centeredness are essential to ACO success for this reason. The patient who was not self-referred to the doctor’s office may be more important to population health management than the one who was. Two simple strategies often seen in successful ACOs are longer face-to-face initial visits with patients/families employing true communication skills and nurse coordinators who follow up with patients after they leave the facility or office. Technology is extending the virtual reach of these physicians and coordinators and is proving their “ROI,” or return on investment, in the value-based payment era.

8. **Scale-Sufficient Patient Population** – There are certain frontend investments and ongoing fixed costs requiring a minimum scale of patient population to succeed. Medicare’s ACO minimum threshold of 5,000 beneficiaries is a useful benchmark.

D. **These Apply to Everyone**

Because a successful ACO must be “win/win,” with every stakeholder motivated to achieve their optimum value-added contribution to the enterprise, these principles transcend medical specialty, employment status, payer relationship or facility type. They are not mysterious; they are doable; culture

⁵ Toward Accountable Care, The Advisory Board Company (2010).

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dominates. It is the goal of *The Physicians' Accountable Care Toolkit*® to serve as a roadmap for every reader to be able to unlock ACO success for their patients, themselves, their community and their ACO. We recognize there are various models and levels of integration. As a result, the recommendations that follow may not be applicable to all, but serve as a starting point and reflect strategies that may be modified and adapted based on variables such as geographic location, provider team make-up, access to facilities and equipment such as breadth of service offerings and patient population (high risk, rising risk and low risk).

II. Could Accountable Care Be A Good Thing In A Rural Setting?

In *The Physician's Accountable Care Toolkit*®, we learned what an ACO is, that it will not be going away and how to know if one stands to be successful. But what, specifically, will this mean for rural health partners and the populations they serve?

A. Cons

- Rural health providers are generally underfunded and overburdened, being tasked with providing care to the most vulnerable populations within a community. Consequently, they lack the time, resources, and intellectual bandwidth to take on yet another project. “Small size, low-patient volumes, and limited human resource and financial capacity...make it difficult for rural hospitals and physician practices to participate in risk-based or shared savings arrangements such as accountable care organizations (ACOs) and bundled payments.”⁶
- You have seen this “next big thing” before, and it didn’t work out as advertised. Decades of policy efforts, such as the Critical Access Hospital model, have failed to address rural health issues. Private and public payment policies, coupled with regulatory requirements not tailored for rural health needs, have actually promoted fragmentation and isolation of care delivery in rural settings.
- Rural providers routinely address the needs of the most vulnerable portion of the population with complex, co-morbidities complicated by poverty and other socio-economic and environmental circumstances. These health care ‘super-users’ may not readily respond to simple preventative services, an immediate focus of the ACO’s approach.
- Elements of a rural care continuum, such as the faith community, local health departments, community pharmacies and the YMCA, may lack the statutory authority or precedence to enter into compensation arrangements with third parties to recompense them for the services they provide. Non-health care political governance may delay the innovation needed.

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- Collaborative care raises concerns of malpractice and HIPAA privacy liability.
- It is increasingly difficult to find independent physicians to recruit to an ACO because so many are employed by a health system with their own exclusive ACO.
- It is often hard in a rural setting to get an adequately-sized patient panel in a contained geographic area. The wide geographic dispersion of patients and caregivers requires a tradeoff between panel size and ease of integration of care.
- Providers in rural areas are so busy they often cannot stay abreast of the new and complex requirements to adapt to value-based payments for population health management. They often lack the core infrastructure, such as interoperable electronic medical records, needed to build an ACO.
- The patients in rural areas tend to have poorer health literacy and lower health payment reimbursement. Distance is a barrier to regular care. Patients in rural areas also are older and sicker than their urban counterparts. These factors tend to exacerbate challenges related to patient engagement and self-management and leave rural providers without the capital necessary to pay for an ACO's infrastructure and staffing. Having thinner margins, they are more wary of assuming risk.⁷
- Rural providers are already efficient, accustomed to “doing more with less.” This leaves less “low-hanging fruit” for immediate savings.
- Rural providers are concerned their small population size and distance from a large urban-based partner will not allow a tailored approach to population health management for their rural population and the savings distribution fairly attributable to them will be diluted.⁸
- Few ACOs currently, formally and institutionally integrate community health partners, such as local health departments or community pharmacists.

B. Pros

- The current *status quo* is not an option. The “default future” for medicine in general is more fee cuts, less control of the physician/patient relationship, and degraded patient care as the system further fragments. Rural health leaders have the opportunity to participate in redesigning health care delivery, regaining empowerment over the process and being compensated for their leadership. The chief medical officer of one rural ACO stated: “Our ability to continue raising rates to the commercial

⁷ [Kaiser Health News](#), *Accountability Slow to Reach Rural Hospitals*, (Sept. 2014).

⁸ J. Ortiz, *Accountable Care Organizations: Benefits and Barriers as Perceived by Rural Health Clinic Management*, [Rural Remote Health](#), 13(2):2417, (April-June 2013).

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market, in order to make up for the Medicare and Medicaid shortfalls [;] we are really running out of that rope. ... We really felt like we needed to get moving to a different [reimbursement] model.”⁹

- Many rural practitioners will find the greatest positives of a well-organized ACO, such as improved communication and coordination and a focus on preventative care, are already components of their practice.
- As with all providers who have been heroically battling a deeply fragmented system to provide cost-effective care, rural health providers will find rewarding a model designed to truly gauge and value their contributions to health care, show respect for what they have been attempting to do and validate why they chose to practice in rural communities.
- System-wide care delivery improvements will vastly leverage the expertise and experience of rural providers, create free time through extender support and patient self-management, and may remove much of the frustration experienced with the current limitations presented by the health care system. With an ACO’s focus on preventative care and population-based management, rural providers are better able to influence and be compensated for patient care and risk identification to avoid crisis-events.
- Payment reform is shifting compensation from high-cost procedures often performed on rural patients in faraway urban facilities, to savings derived from wellness, prevention, care management and care transition coordination; the latter all in the wheelhouse of rural providers. Not only will you be empowered to practice medicine the right way for the betterment of your patients’ health, but more health care dollars will be directed toward the local community.
- Medicaid, which is the payer for a large percentage of rural patients, is moving to accountable care. This is a game-changer.
- Rural providers are usually in a rural area in order to make a difference. They are more comfortable with collaboration. They are more nimble and typically have a more profound and immediate understanding of the socio-economic determinants impacting the wellness of their community. The path to understanding and engagement can be shorter for them.

⁹Charlotte Huff, *The Rural Advantage*, *Trustee Magazine*, (January 1, 2013).

III. The Recommended Approach For Developing Integrative Accountable Care Strategies

In the value-based reimbursement era, each stakeholder is rethinking its role. Those roles, pitfalls, and opportunities vary by setting. Some of the questions are: What is our maximum value-adding contribution across an entire patient population? How can we generate quality and savings improvements for the ACO and thus maximize performance rewards through our role in the system in our medical community?

Under accountable care, the gains for providers will not be from seeing a patient cheaper or quicker, but how to reduce costs for a patient population over a given period of time.

Quality metrics exist to measure the quality of care rendered by one physician to one patient. But it is as fundamental as it is radically different, that accountable care strategic developments for any specialty and community health partner focus on excising avoidable waste across the continuum of care for the entire patient population. New coordination transition, education and engagement metrics will need to be developed and properly weighted by peers.

What an ACO should prioritize is given by this review of the top five high-yield targets for ACOs:

- Wellness/prevention
- Mental health management
- Reduced hospitalizations
- Care coordination and transitions
- Multi-specialty coordination of complex patients

From these potential initiatives, the ACO should prioritize the ones likely to have the quickest and biggest results within their community. The selected initiative must have proven metrics and community health care leaders willing to champion the effort. See what is working elsewhere and present the question: what are the number one things you could or would do within your community to improve wellness, if you had the resources. This should reveal the potential prioritized list of value-add ACO initiatives.

Once this list is in hand, the last step is to marry them in a particular locale through a gap analysis to the areas of avoidable waste in that region. The ACO stakeholder can then individually make a compelling case to their partners that an area of the patient population's greatest need is matched with the ACO's greatest strengths.

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Stakeholders also can benefit from ACO negotiation and marketing tips, knowledge of how to ensure fair savings pool distribution, and what clinically valid metrics should be used to accurately measure their performance.

Ideally, this process should be led by a well-respected and diverse peer “Accountable Care Work Group” of a national or state professional society, of that category of providers or experts in a given type of delivery setting.

IV. The Process Followed For Creation Of This Rural Health Accountable Care Guide

A number of rural health leaders realized rural providers must be prepared for the approaching accountable care era. They partnered with the Toward Accountable Care Consortium and Initiative (TAC). Following initial guidance from members of this TAC Rural Accountable Care Workgroup, staff and attorneys for the TAC conducted a national literature search, with emphasis on value-based care and benchmarking recommendations. The findings were further reviewed and revised by the TAC Rural Accountable Care Workgroup and presented to the TAC Physician Advisory Committee.

Macro predictive cost savings estimates were made, but a refined financial predictive modeling analysis, though needed, is beyond the scope of this project. Likewise, while guidance on the nature and type of performance metric selection is provided, the actual full impact of these metrics is beyond the scope of this project.

The peer reviewers are comfortable this *Guide* represents a useful start in this important and rapidly evolving field. This *Guide* is a beginning, not an end, to the process.

V. Recommended Accountable Care Initiatives For Rural Providers

With the guidance from the Dermatology Accountable Care Workgroup, the TAC staff engaged in national-level research and investigation of activities to determine the highest value-adding initiatives involving dermatology. The prioritization methodology in Section III was followed.

A. Awareness/Leadership: The Rural Provider’s Role in Guiding Change

Rural providers need to know what an ACO is, how to organize in a manner that improves the likelihood of success and encourage professional opportunities, while mitigating risks involved. As trusted leaders

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in the community, rural health care providers need to be at the forefront of organizational activities that align and engage other civic champions who serve and advocate for the health and well-being of the community. The movement to population health and accountable care relies on both being aware and raising awareness of the concept of the triple aim: (i) improving the patient experience of care (including quality and satisfaction); (ii) improving the health of populations; and (iii) reducing the *per capita* cost of health care.¹⁰

A rural provider should initiate a process sometimes called the “crescendo effect,” educating community and religious leaders, and prompting those leaders to serve as the champions. Rural providers should lead in generating awareness of the opportunities that come only from preventable conditions such as obesity, the use of tobacco products and by supporting adherence to medications and medical advice, and other actions tailored to unique community circumstances and resources. Key factors common to successful implementation in rural settings:

- Community buy-in;
- Physicians who leverage their position of authority and trust within the community;
- Dispelling the myth of inferior care provided in rural settings (i.e., must travel to big city/big hospital to receive quality care);
- Sharing leadership. Understanding the difficulty in maintaining succession planning based on compressed management systems in rural areas must be accounted for in early designs.

The success, and sustainability of accountable care depends upon the development of strong relationships, clear goals and progressive incentive structure. This is not something that can develop ‘organically’ or haphazardly; it requires a focused and determined catalyst. Speaking on the topic of developing preventative care collaborations generally, the Bipartisan Policy Center observed:

“[E]stablishing and sustaining linkages is difficult: the process requires leadership, commitment, and ultimately, an intentional, focused and durable infrastructure for maintaining effective coordination and collaboration over time.”¹¹

Examples:

- **Hennepin Health:** In the face of a decreasing county budget and an increased demand for essential “safety net” health services, the Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health Department spearheaded the development of the Hennepin Health and ACO in partnership with a

¹⁰ www.ihl.org/engage/initiatives/tripleaim/.

¹¹ Dietz, W., Goetzel, R., Levi, R. et al *A Prevention Prescription for Improving Health and Health Care in America*, Bipartisan Policy Center (May 2015).

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local hospital, a state-based public health non-profit and a local health center. With resources made available through the partnership, the ACO found that it was able to provide its services across a wider continuum of care, thus improving the delivery of care and outcomes for an expanded population. For example between 2012 and 2013, the ACO experienced a decrease in emergency room visits by 9.1 percent, with a simultaneous increase in inpatient visits by 3.3 percent. The ACO has generated savings for the participants, enabling them to make further investments in the infrastructure for further development.¹²

- **Colorado's Accountable Care Collaborative:** In 2011 the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing led the way in the move to accountable care and shared savings by developing a pilot ACO program to administer the delivery of Medicaid across seven regional care collaborative organizations. Early results from this pilot program are positive, with “cost, utilization and client experience trending in the right direction.”
- **Austen Bio Innovation Institute:** In partnership with Summit County Public Health, Austen Bio Innovation Institute developed an Accountable Care Collaborative. In doing this they partnered with many “non-traditional” entities, such as the Park System and Legal Aid to create a number of community outreach programs centered on preventative care and linking underserved populations to services, including the development of a community care coordination phone line connecting patients to community resources.¹³

B. Care Management

Though data from rural ACOs is scant to date, care management is uniformly noted as an essential key to success by the early rural ACOs. Care management involves coordinated efforts to manage a patient beyond a specific episode, with ongoing services and support addressing behavioral change, healthy lifestyles and medication adherence. One survey of four rural ACOs found these common elements of care management in all of them:

- “Identifying the high-risk population, often defined as the 5 percent to 10 percent of patients with the most co-morbidities and/or high utilization and spending.
- “Providing care coordinators with access to the relevant patient information (through the HIT system), as well as information regarding resources available in their community.
- “Directing patients to the most appropriate services and service providers (advice provided by physicians and/or care coordinators).”¹⁴

¹² Sandberg, S., Erikson C., et al., *Hennepin Health: A Safety-Net Accountable Care Organization for the Expanded Medicaid Population* Health Affairs (November, 2014) vol. 33, no. 11, 1975-1984.

¹³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Opportunities for Enhanced Collaboration: Public Health Departments and Accountable Care Organizations*. Atlanta, BA: CDC; 2014. CDC Health Policy Series No. 1.

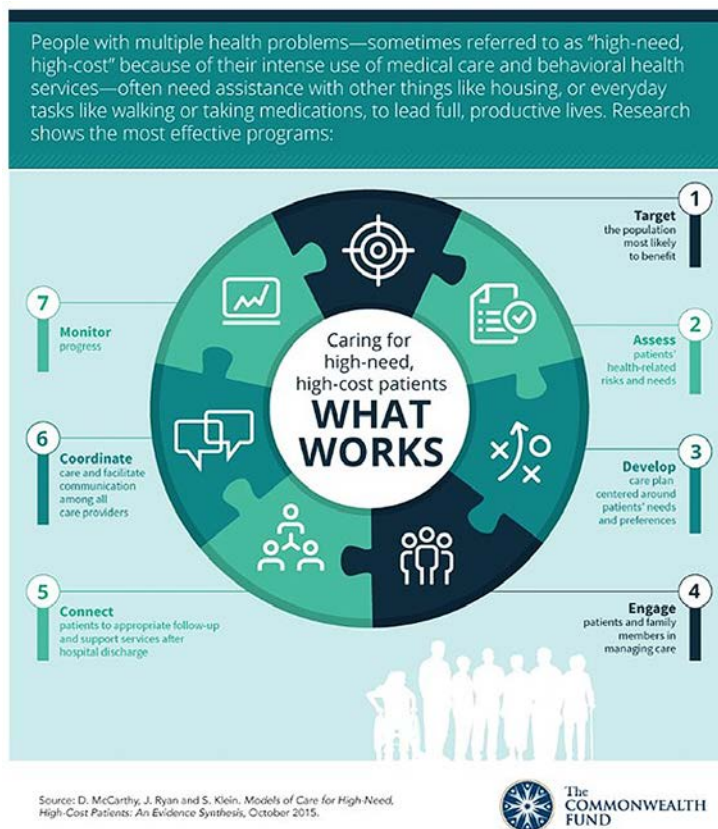
¹⁴ June Baloh, et al., *Developmental Strategies and Challenges of Rural Accountable Care Organizations*, Rural Policy Research Institute Center for Rural Health Policy Analysis, Rural Policy Brief 2015-3, (Feb. 2015).

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In addition, three of the four included redesigned medication management through the care management process or through data sharing. (See, Leverage the Impact of the Community Pharmacist at Section V.D.)

Kurt Pittner, a board member of the rural ACO, Trinity Pioneer ACO, in Fort Dodge, Iowa, noted that, “Patients with chronic medical issues are being followed more closely after discharge to the nursing home and sometimes to their own home. Pittner says, ‘It’s not just episodic treatment anymore. We are going to seek you out; we’re going to try to keep the community as healthy as possible and we’re going to do all that we can.’”¹⁵

Care transitions obviously form a vital element of care management. It is so important that it is sometimes singled out as a separate process. It involves coordinating and traversing the movement of patients between settings and facilities (i.e., hospital, nursing home, primary care, specialists and home with home health) as their chronic care needs change. The National Rural ACO Consortium recommends that rural ACOs “focus care coordination on ‘Top 10 percent’ of patients to achieve savings”¹⁶



¹⁵ Charlotte Huff, *The Rural Advantage*, *Trustee Magazine*, (January 1, 2013).

¹⁶ National Rural ACO Consortium, Lynn Barr, MPH, *Pathway to Sustainability*, PowerPoint downloadable at www.nationalruralaco.com.

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The TAC Rural Accountable Care Workgroup noted overwhelmed physicians can leverage free time through use of care managers and more informed self-managed patients. They also observed in a rural setting with limited skilled manpower available, the care management impact can be multiplied by electronic communications, once the personal face-to-face relationship has been established.

C. Leverage the Impact of the Community Pharmacist

Pharmacists in rural settings may be the health care professional with the most contact with a rural ACO's patient population. By reinventing their role to include being dispensers of knowledge in addition to being dispensers of products, they can add significant value to rural ACOs.

They can diminish avoidable costs significantly. The average Medicare Beneficiary with multiple comorbidities receives an average of 50 prescriptions a year.¹⁷ Thirty-two percent of all hospitalizations are attributable to medications.¹⁸ Patients with chronic conditions adhere to medication regimens only 33 percent to 50 percent of the time.¹⁹

ACOs should acknowledge and integrate the value-add role of pharmacists in having the patient or their caregiver understand proper usage of medications. This can be leveraged through technology (1) with live video conversations at the actual time of use, (2) with the patient's caregiver to avoid their trip to the pharmacy, (3) if the patient has questions, (4) to actively check on high-risk, frail patients with complex regimens, and (5) to engage the patient who has missed a refill or received potentially conflicting prescriptions from different prescribers. If patients are taking the same medication, say, for example, for a type of cancer, the pharmacist can lead live or virtual group sessions. Some medications that are more cost-effective are not prescribed because of the complexity of their usage.

Community pharmacists should be fed medication prescriptions for ACO patients through electronic data feeds. The pharmacist is then in position for medication reconciliation. There can be 24-hours/day drug utilization review with prompt coordination with all providers across the care continuum.

In ACOs, pharmacists have been found to be more and more integrated into the medical home treatment design process. "Integrating pharmacists into primary care can prevent avoidable spending by increasing patient adherence, optimizing prescribing regimens and preventing medication-related complications. ... To address...cost and quality opportunities, progressive health systems are expanding the role of the pharmacist as a central component of primary care transformation."²⁰ The pharmacist can contact the patient regarding an unfilled script, an overdue refill or non-adherence issues

¹⁷ Medicare: Recognize the Need for Chronic Care Coordination, Serial No. 110-7, pp. 19-20, (May 9, 2007).

¹⁸ M. Smith, et al., *Why Pharmacists Belong in the Medical Home*, *Health Affairs* 29(5):906-913 (2010).

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ The Advisory Board: Your guide to building a successful integrated pharmacy program at <https://www.advisory.com/research/care-transformation-center/care-transformation-center-blog/2015/01/integrated-pharmacy-models-in-primary-care>.

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revealed through electronic data feed. The pharmacist can interact remotely with care managers, the medical home or other pharmacists. They can help implement evidence-based best practices such as the use of generics when indicated.

When the local pharmacist may be the only health professional a rural patient sees during the course of an illness, the impact of pharmacists can be significant if the above-mentioned opportunities are recognized and enabled. The TAC Rural Accountable Care Workgroup emphasized that telehealth contacts for widely dispersed patients can be effective, but only if supplemented with face-to-face contact. The community pharmacist is ideally positioned to be such a contact for the ACO.

Example:

The Asheville Project:

One of the earliest and most successful studies to demonstrate the impact community pharmacists have on the management of chronic disease within a population is the 1996 Asheville Project, the product of a partnership between the City of Asheville, the North Carolina Center for Pharmaceutical Care and Mission St. Joseph Health System, a health system serving a largely rural-based population. By enhancing the role of the dispensing pharmacist as an educator and monitor in the area of diabetes management, over 50 percent of patients experienced improved outcomes. After the first year, the program reported a mean direct savings in medical costs of \$1,200.00 per patient.²¹

D. Patient and Family Education and Communication

The quality and integrity of long term care for chronic illnesses and the success of efforts to *prevent* the onset of such devastating illness depends upon a patient's informed participation in his own health care in advance of crisis-events. Allowing patients to be part of the care plan development helps ensure their ongoing engagement and investment in their health care needs. In addition, patient adherence to a care plan and self-management help drive down health care costs.

Patient-centered care also emphasizes patient and family education as a means of achieving patient-centered goals of care and preventing unnecessary or unwanted care. The ACO model provides opportunities for frontline rural caregivers and extenders to receive greater institutional support and recognition for their contribution in helping patients to articulate their health goals and priorities. Community health partners can initiate and facilitate these sometimes challenging, time consuming and yet vital discussions around goals of care.

²¹ Cranor CW, Buntin BA, Christensen DB, *The Asheville Project: long term clinical and economic outcomes of a community pharmacy diabetes care program*, J. Am Pharm Assoc. 2003, 43(2): 173-84.

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Examples:

- **Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (Boston):** Since the 1990s, the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute has been the vanguard in integrating patients and their families at all stages of treatment. The facility features more than 400 volunteer family and patient advisors, who help patients and their families be informed partners at every stage of care. Their contribution, including input in facility redesign, quality assurance protocols and other facility infrastructure, has had a measurable impact, resulting in the dramatic reduction of fatal medication errors. Their contribution has led to a fundamental culture shift within the facility. Staff, initially skeptical of their role and ability to add value, now wonder “how they ever ran Dana-Farber without having patients and families deeply involved.”²²
- **Contra Costa Regional Medical and Health Centers (California)** fundamentally transformed its emergency behavioral health systems through a partnership with patient and family advisors, staff and community health partners. Based on this feedback and initiative, Contra Costa cut hundreds of staff hours from administrative processes, leaving greater time to devote directly to patients. This resulted in reducing care delays and the number of “walk outs,” patients who left the emergency department prior to receiving care. This also translated to an improved, individualized discharge and after-care plan.²³

E. Transportation

Part of the new health care model means identifying and addressing external barriers to care. For rural health, distance and transportation are two of the biggest barriers to consistent health care access.²⁴ Many ACOs address this barrier by providing transportation to scheduled appointments.²⁵ However, when providing care in rural communities, distance is an issue not faced by urban counterparts. For that reason, rural providers must continue to be resourceful: the use of community health workers, lay caregivers, the faith community, telemedicine and other emerging technologies are resources of particular importance.

²² James L. Reinertsen, Maureen Bisognano and Michael D. Pugh, *Seven Leadership Leverage Points for Organization-Level Improvement in Health Care*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Healthcare Improvement, 2008) p. 19.

²³ M. Millenson, *Building Patient-Centeredness in the Real World: The Engaged Patient and the Accountable Care Organization*, Health Quality Advisors, available at: <http://www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/health-care/building-patient-centeredness-in-the-real-world.pdf>.

²⁴ Bolin JN, Bellamy G, Ferdinand AO, Ojinnaka C. Rural Access to Quality Health Insurance. In: *Rural Healthy People 2020*. Vol 1. Texas A&M University Health Science Center, School of Public Health, Southwest Rural Health Research Center; 2015:1-11 at 2. See also Buzzza C, Ono SS, Turvey C, et al. Distance is relative: unpacking a principal barrier in rural healthcare. *J. Gen Intern Med.* 2011; 26 Suppl 2:648-654. National Rural Health Association. *What's different about rural health care?* Available at <http://www.ruralhealthweb.org/go/left/about-ruralhealth.com>.

²⁵ As one example, providing free transportation to dialysis appointments. State Medicaid programs have found routine access to transportation to doctors' meetings greatly improved patient adherence to treatment and improved outcomes.

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Example:

In 2015, the state of Alabama launched a review of its public health infrastructure and population needs with the Alabama Community Health Improvement Planning Process. The study identified access to care as one of three primary objectives for the years of 2015-2019, and lack of transportation, particularly in rural communities as one of the greatest barriers to that goal.²⁶ As a result, public health departments throughout the state have launched regular transportation services to citizens in rural communities to cancer centers and doctors' appointments at low or no cost. While this initiative is too recently launched to provide specific data demonstrating improved access and outcome, further attention and quantification of impact is expected as a part of the state's continued assessment plan.

F. Telemedicine

The TAC Rural Accountable Care Workgroup noted that electronic access to specialists had two significant benefits: (1) the quality and scope of care would improve, and (2) it would allay the perception of patients that local health care is inferior. Value-based payment justifies investment in what works rather than what X payer will pay. It is unleashing telemedicine innovation. The University of Mississippi Medical Center's ("UMMC") telehealth program demonstrates the possibilities inherent in this emergent technology to provide quality specialist care to rural communities. The Center in Jackson, Mississippi is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week and allows rural clinics and hospitals to connect with specialists at the University. Using remote diagnostic tools, these specialists can directly assess and treat patients many miles away who would not otherwise have such routinized access to specialty services. In addition to direct consultations with patients and expert consultations and coaching with local providers, the facility provides back-up monitoring for facilities' ICUs, emergency departments and post-surgical recovery units.²⁷

It is not only routine access to specialist care that is important in improving health outcomes, but patient engagement and adherence. Technology can play an important role here as well, as demonstrated by the Oregon Health and Sciences University's Health Buddy program. Health Buddy is a small electronic device that the University supplies to patients living outside the Portland metro area. The device cues patients to enter health data, including weight and blood pressure. Where this data – or the lack of a response - shows an increased risk for heart failure, the patient receives an immediate call from a nurse practitioner to get the patient 'back on track.' Results to date show participants in this program experience fewer crisis events and less than 20 percent of the Health Buddy patients ended up being re-hospitalized within 30 days.²⁸

²⁶ 2015 State of Alabama Community Health Improvement Plan, available at http://adph.org/accreditation/assets/CHIP_2015_RevAugust.pdf.

²⁷ <http://www.govtech.com/dc/Telehealth-Command-Center-Connects-Doctors-in-Jackson-Miss-with-Patients-Statewide.html>

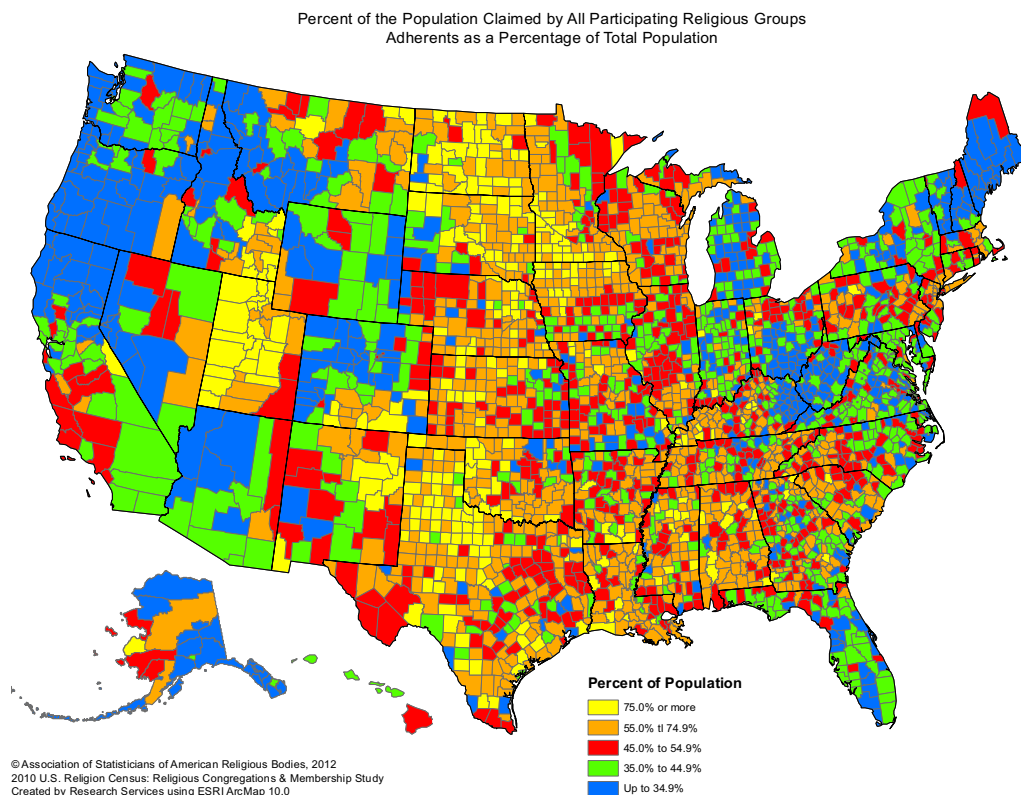
²⁸ *Id.*

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As promising as these new technologies are, studies and experience have shown they are only going to be as effective as the underlying relationships. The TAC Rural Accountable Care Workgroup emphasized human contact and connection are absolutely fundamental. This may mean taking medical care outside of the clinical setting and mobilizing community partners as lay coaches for a populations' health decisions. Interaction with nurses from call centers, pharmacists and other providers are all important, but experience has shown that it is the personal touch and personal accountability that makes the difference. To this end, it benefits ACOs to think outside the traditional clinic box, reaching out to the community and its strong, existing support networks.

G. The Faith Community

As the map illustrates, as compared to the 1,128 Federally Qualified Community Health Centers, 1,200 United Way agencies and 80,000 schools, there are around 350,000 congregations in the U.S. with one-half partnering in some way in the community. Congregations are anchor supports, especially in rural areas. The shift to value-based health care payment not only stands to provide economic return to community partnerships, but also to forge better linkage to these untapped resources to improve health, as seen in the faith community.



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CEO of Cornerstone Health Care, an ACO based in High Point, NC, Grace Terrell, M.D. noted, the “medical and financial model embedded in fee-for service is physician-centric, hospital-centric and undervalues the roles and potential contributions of the wider community network in which patients actually live their lives. How can we integrate the official world of traditional health care services with the unofficial safety net that is where the patients live their lives as real people, members of churches, who are connected to ‘shut-ins’ who may need health care services?”

H. Palliative/End-of-Life

Rural patients are on average older and sicker than other populations, yet have a lower level of health literacy, including end-of-life issues. Transitioning to a sustainable, more efficient and patient-centered delivery of health care also requires we examine how we approach end-of-life care and how we best support patients confronting terminal illnesses. Almost one-third of Medicare dollars are spent on beneficiaries during the last year of life, and nearly 40 percent of that spending occurs in the last 30 days of life.²⁹ Despite the expenditure and crisis-based interventions utilized in end-of-life care, there is increasing concern we are not doing enough for our patients. Increased integration of experienced palliative care is one solution. The use of palliative care has been shown to decrease readmissions and length of stay while increasing quality of life and life span.³⁰

Palliative care programs that are positioned across the continuum of care settings have been valued, successful components of bending the cost curve.³¹ Through patient-centered care customization, palliative care lowers overall health care costs.³² Goals of care discussions often lead patients to choose less invasive and aggressive care paths, thereby avoiding unnecessary procedures and hospitalizations, while aligning therapies more concordantly with their goals of care.

Palliative care also emphasizes patient and family education as a means of achieving the patient-centered goals of care and preventing unnecessary or unwanted care.

Members of the TAC Rural Accountable Care Workgroup observed that, as a profession “we refer patients to hospice care too late.” This is compounded in rural communities where there simply aren’t adequate hospice resources available. For example, of the 3,925 hospices operating in the United

²⁹ Face the Facts Website, During Final Difficult Days, Medicare Spending Spikes, September 7, 2012, available at <http://www.facethefactsusa.org/facts/during-final-difficult-days-medicare-spending-spikes>; Hogan, C. et al., Medicare Beneficiaries’ Cost and Use of Care in the Last Year of Life: Final Report to the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, Washington, DC: Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, 2000.

³⁰ Adler, Eric et al., Palliative Care in the Treatment of Advanced Heart Failure, 120 CIRCULATION 25, 2597, 2597 (2009); R. Sean Morrison et al., Palliative Care Consultation Teams Cut Hospital Costs for Medicaid Beneficiaries, 30 HEALTH AFFAIRS 3, 454-63 (Apr.7, 2011).

³¹ Bendaly, E.A. et al, Financial impact of palliative care consultation in a public hospital, 11 J. OF PALLIATIVE MED. 10 1304-08 (2008); R.S. Morrison et al, Cost savings associated with US hospital palliative care consultation programs, 168 ARCH. INTERN. MED. 16, 1783-90 (2008); T.J. Smith et al., A High-Volume Specialist Palliative Care Unit and Team May Reduce In-Hospital End-of-Life Care Costs, 6 J. OF PALLIATIVE MED. 5, 699-705.

³² <http://pmj.sagepub.com/content/28/2/130.full>.

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States in 2013, less than a quarter were located in rural areas.³³ However, this is not just a resource issue, but an educational one as well. We need to retool our thinking in how we meet the needs of our patients.

Example:

Trinity Pioneer ACO: Created in 2011, the Trinity Pioneer ACO was formed in rural Iowa under the Pioneer ACO model and is the most rural across the program. Since 2012, the ACO has developed an Advanced Medical Team approach to patient care, which has focused on chronic disease management and education. The ACO also has provided extensive palliative care services for its patients across the continuum of care, from telehealth interventions, in-home services and routinized follow-up care and management. As a result, Trinity reaped:

- The highest reported patient satisfaction among all Pioneer ACOs;
- An average savings of approximately \$70,000 for every patient receiving palliative consults;
- Nearly 100 percent rate of participation in palliative care for all oncology patients.³⁴

I. Social Determinants – Through an “Accountable Care Community”

Rural providers face unique challenges compared to their urban counterparts, but one advantage they have is they tend to be more integrated into the communities they serve and have a more profound and immediate understanding of the communities they serve, their needs and the relevant barriers to wellness.

To be successful, every ACO needs to know what it needs. This requires ACO leaders and their community partners to take inventory of community resources and deficits. “To build and improve linkages across private and public health organizations within communities, it is important to identify gaps in needed health services and to fill those gaps by using the strengths and abilities of participating organizations.”³⁵ The participation and leadership of individual rural health providers is important here as, with their existing expertise and long history addressing gaps in coverage for the community, they are able to develop a more comprehensive picture of the managed community, prioritize initiatives based on need and impact and avoid duplication of resources. Put simply, the rural provider remains at the hub of all efforts to improve an individual’s health and the wellness of the community.

³³ Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, Report to the Congress: Medicare Payment Policy, Hospice Services (March 2015) available at <http://medpac.gov/documents/reports/chapter-12-hospice-services-%28march-2015-report%29.pdf>.

³⁴ Rural Health Information Hub: Community Health Gateway, <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/community-health/project-examples/864>

³⁵ Buncombe Co. Health Dept., *Local Public Health Potential Role within ACOs & Research on Clinical Community Connections* p. 2 (March 2014).

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In addition to a formal needs assessment of health care access and quality resources, an ACO must assess and address the social and economic determinants impacting a community's health. As outlined in Healthy People 2020, identification of social determinants within a population recognizes the “critical role” an individual's environment and community play in improving health. These factors are in part responsible for preventable disparities across and between communities.³⁶ This assessment of external environmental factors impacting health outcomes is a practical extension of the shift to focus on wellness management of a population. As a starting point, the CDC, through its Healthy People 2020, has honed in on improving graduation rates among populations as one way to impact these disparities.

VI. We've Got Some Great ACO Contributions - Now What?

As noted, there are some very clear strategies for improving care and reducing overall costs for rural ACOs that are ideal for accountable care's emphasis on collaboration and value-based reimbursement. Rural health care leaders may want to either form an ACO or join one. How do you influence proper alignment to address these unique rural needs? How do you protect your interests? How does a rural health provider find the right ACO partner, mesh these initiatives into programming, and be rewarded fairly?

A. Pick the Right ACO(s)

As detailed in the companion white paper, *The Physician's Accountable Care Toolkit*[©], there are eight elements essential for every successful ACO. They are agnostic as to who or what owns or hosts the ACO, but they must all be present.

Culture will usually be the tell-tale indicator on whether any ACO has a chance for success.

- **Physician-Led** – Longstanding habits of individualism and competition among individual physician groups will have to transform to a culture of cooperation and collaboration. Physicians have not led complex change, are resistant to capital risk and worry that fewer tests and procedure will lower incomes.
- **Hospital-Led** – Hospitals need to change focus from the current business model of providing acute inpatient care and address head-on the operational impact of decreased admissions. Hospitals need to adopt a partnering culture with physicians and depart from a command and control approach encouraged by the bureaucratic fee-for-service system.

¹⁴ CDC, Healthy People 2020 Leading Health Indicators: Social Determinants, (May 2014). available at: https://www.healthypeople.gov/sites/default/files/HP2020_LHI_Soc_Determ.pdf.

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- **Community-Led** – Though it is obvious moving from a system of siloed “sick care” to integrated population “health” requires collaboration and interdependence with a broad array of community health partners inside and outside of the formal medical system, the cultural shift to collaboration at this scale will be challenging. Look for focused and clear direction and strong committed champions.

1. Twelve Questions To Ask Before Signing Up With An ACO:

- i. Is it selective in picking and keeping only high-performing members, or are they signing up everybody to get “old school” referrals?
- ii. What is your specific, value-add strategic plan?
- iii. What are the opportunities identified in your needs assessment?
- iv. Do they include my skillsets?
- v. How will you distribute savings?
- vi. Is it on a merit basis—savings distribution in proportion to contribution?
- vii. Is the ACO exclusive—can I join another ACO?
- viii. Am I personally at risk? Are there fees?
- ix. Have you spent millions on IT—may I see your budget? Will there be anything left of savings distributions after feeding the overhead?
- x. Is the IT spend usable? Do you have the data I really need: (1) where are the care gaps? (2) Is there medical chart and decision support I can actually use? (3) Are there clinically valid metrics and reporting?
- xi. Do you have knowledgeable and empowered providers on the clinical, IT and finance committees?
- xii. What is your community health partnering strategy?

2. Whether You Join One or Start Your Own, Here Are The 13 Core Services A Rural ACO Will Need:

- i. Care coordination training, including policies and procedures.
- ii. HIT:
 - a. Data extraction warehouse, with analytics, decision support and reporting.
 - b. Capability to work initially with claims data and limited lab and chart data only.
 - c. Must be able to interface with EMR clinical data.
 - d. Capability to perform patient stratification, predictive modeling and provider-specific comparisons on cost and quality.

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- e. Capability to transmit health data via telehealth modalities.
- f. Provide specific charts and dashboard examples.
- iii. Training regarding primary care and complex chronic care management services, including qualification for Medicare payments for them.
- iv. How to recruit, determine “ROI” for, and optimize effectiveness of, care coordinators/navigators.
- v. Change Management:
 - a. Provider culture change skills and strategies—transformational coaching.
 - b. Lead monthly Leadership Committee meetings of ACO leadership to facilitate change and address implementation issues.
- vi. Patient and family engagement strategies and expertise.
- vii. Evidence-based best practice prioritized performance improvement strategies and support.
- viii. Guidance on the capability to track pediatric population health in the event a state Medicaid moves to value-based payment.
- ix. Demonstrated overall project management capability including a specific designated senior liaison contact.
- x. High-value referral/affiliate network development capabilities.
- xi. MSSP administrative expertise, including patient notifications, marketing approvals, financial administration and reporting.
- xii. Strategies and capability to integrate community health resources and faith community resources into the ACO population health process.
- xiii. Strategies and capabilities to leverage the value of telehealth and other applicable virtual health modalities in rural ACO population health.

Health systems have capital and system design expertise, so depending on their answers to the several questions above, they can be optimum partners.

The eight elements will determine the attractiveness of the ACO regardless of whether it is part of a hospital system, under the roof of a large multi-specialty clinic or a network of small practices or a community collaborative. However, each model has its nuances and presents different strengths and weaknesses. Available ACO options will, of course, be different in metropolitan and rural settings and will vary based on the patient population.

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A. You Have Identified a Winning ACO, Now Have the ACO Want to Pick You

1. **Build Relationships** – Rural providers should be engaged with all the medical specialties and the local health care delivery system. This is a first step to team-building and readiness to partner.

2. **Have a Compelling Story** – As noted, the skill sets of rural providers are ideally suited for ACOs. For example, health departments have the benefit of already operating in a manner compatible with an ACO setting and objectives and are thus not only ideally suited to adapt to an ACO, but to serve as a leader. Utilizing them in an ACO is a “no-brainer,” even though they rarely are. We have heard of the “elevator pitch” for startups, whereby the entrepreneur can tell a convincing reason to invest in their company in the length of the time it takes to ride an elevator. Rural providers have a great story and should reduce it to one or two pages. These initiatives are simple “plug and play” add-ons to the ACO’s existing activities, are synergistic, and will help the ACO meet quality and savings goals if you are joining an existing ACO and can be the core set of talking points to rally support if you are creating your own.

Strategic Note: Start simple. Start with your one best initiative, and then expand later.

3. **Primary Care Is the Client** – In the new era, success will depend on the patient-family centered medical home and neighborhood. Though primary care in some cases has lost its decision-making authority to health systems, payers and large clinics, at the end of the day, primary care will be your client.

VII. What Are The Relevant Metrics?

A. The Basic Categories and Sources

You will need baseline data, of course, to create the comparison point on quality, efficiency and patient satisfaction “before” the ACO took over so you can compare it to what happened “after.” Hopefully, some of this data also will be useful to determine local gaps in care to help you pinpoint initiatives to pursue. Broadly, the measures chosen will need to cover quality, efficiency and patient satisfaction. An ACO may choose to match clinical initiatives and metrics (e.g., prevention of readmissions for suicide attempts and the readmission rate for suicide attempts), but early metrics could be more general. The National Quality Forum, National Committee for Quality Assurance, and the metrics required for the CMS Medicare Shared Savings Program are recommended sources for nationally validated metrics.

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B. Examples of Measures That Measure Rural ACO Participants' Performance Unique to the Rural Setting

While at this time there is not a developed body of metrics specific to rural health care providers per se, metrics are essential to measure which providers are performing the tasks assigned in the initiatives selected by the ACO and the achievement of the desired outcomes. Additionally, before an ACO can share in any savings created, it must demonstrate it met the MSSP quality performance standards using 33 nationally recognized quality measures. The measures are further categorized in four key domains: (i) Patient/care giver experience; (ii) Care coordination/patient safety; (iii) At-risk populations, which include patients with diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and mental health issues; and (iv) Preventive Care.

The Rural Health Accountable Care Workgroup suggests priority attention be given to the national measures noted above and to engage in activities that can maximize these efforts such as:

- Transitions of Care Management/Chronic Care Management
- Prevention and Wellness Visits
- Post-Acute Care
- Diabetes Management
- Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease Management
- Congestive Heart Failure Management
- CAD/Stroke/HTN/IVD Quality Measures
- Patient Satisfaction
- Access/Transportation
- Reduced ED Visits for Non-emergencies
- Reduced Readmissions
- Medication Adherence

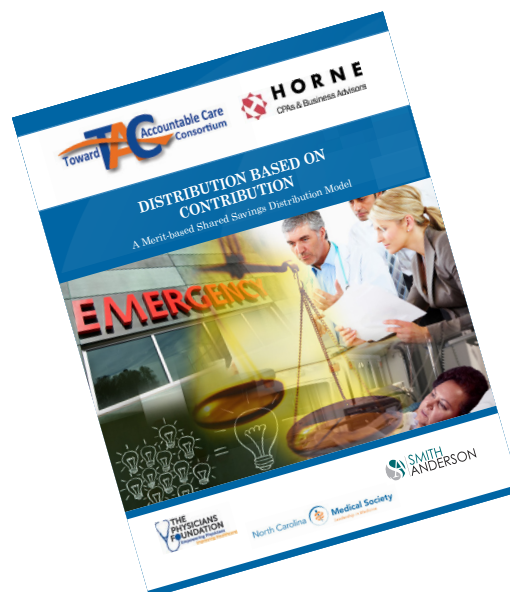
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VIII. How Do I Ensure That The Savings Pool Distribution Is Fair?

As mentioned in the *Toolkit*, some of the savings pool distributions should be used to maintain the ACO infrastructure, to “prime the pump” as it were. As much as possible should go to incentivize providers and facilities for the extra management time, practice pattern changes and effort to create those savings. To create maximum motivation and trust, presumably the proportion of distributions should be in proportion to the relative contributions to the pool. The more incentive, the greater the odds of increasing the size of the savings pool going forward.

Strategic Note: Some ACOs may choose to use a portion of their shared savings to partially compensate hospitals and specialists who are seeing revenue reductions due to changes in practice patterns (which is not offset by increase in market share and overhead reductions). Some ACOs will distribute savings to capital investors. We caution such tactics will slow the transformational changes needed, sap motivation and ultimately challenge the competitive viability of the ACO altogether.

The TAC Consortium and Initiative has overseen the development of a merit-based shared savings pool distribution methodology for use with multi-specialty ACO initiatives. The *Guide* can be found here: http://www.tac-consortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Shared-Savings-Guide_091013_revised_reduced-file.pdf.



X. Protect your interests: Negotiation Tips

A. Negotiating with ACOs

While every provider who follows this guide will bring much to the table and is in position to negotiate a reasonable contract, these are very specialized arrangements and it is recommended that you retain legal counsel knowledgeable in negotiating these types of agreements. Rural health care providers should be particularly mindful of the following areas:

- **Investment** – Any ACO upfront cost obligations?
- **Ongoing Risk** – What happens if the ACO takes on medical cost risk and does not meet targets? Are you proportionately responsible? What additional risk is assumed based on the patient population (i.e. low, rising, high risk)?
- **Distribution of Savings** – It should be distributed in proportion to contribution to savings, after expenses, but will savings go to investors, owners, to cover lost hospital or providers' revenues relative to fee-for-service? Are the expectations for when the distribution of savings is met mutually understood by all negotiating parties?
- **Data** – Who collects it? Is the severity adjusted? Are the metrics clinically valid for your specialty?
- **Corrective Action** – Your continued participation is tied to performance. ACO contracts will have “teeth.” Review the fairness and peer review aspects of the contract.
- **Exclusivity** – Are you contractually bound to just one ACO? (Distinguish from extra-contractual restrictions of a payer, including CMS.)
- **Support** – ACOs are team-based systems that should provide you every reasonable tool and human support to help you optimize your performance and patient care. These should be spelled out. *The Physician's Accountable Care Toolkit*© is specific about what types of support you should seek from your ACO.

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B. Negotiating with Private Payers

The bulk of this *Guide* promotes your reimbursement optimization by: (1) designing high-value initiatives; (2) earning participation in a well-designed ACO by making the value case; and (3) protecting your interests by negotiating a merit-based shared savings distribution. However, both the ACO, in its negotiations with commercial payers, and you, as its member depending on the results, need to know the agreement's hotspots.

- **Prepare Before You Negotiate** – A well-negotiated shared savings agreement merely creates the framework for providers to succeed. There must be a team committed to the shared savings principles who share a common culture of trust and willingness to be flexible and welcome change. It also is important to know who your accountable care partners are. Your facility or practice group could be doing a great job, but the endeavor will fail if others do not provide the necessary quality and efficiency. You must match the strengths of your accountable care organization with any gaps in care for your target patient population and determine whether the predicted return on infrastructure investment will be positive.³⁷
- **Know Your Patient Population** – The arrangement could start with one population and eventually expand. Since the premise of determining savings depends on comparing actual costs with the anticipated unmanaged costs of a defined population, it is crucial to know exactly who is in the patient pool to determine baseline historical spending.
- **Understand How Patients Are Assigned to Physicians** – The predominant shared savings model, the Medicare Shared Savings Program (“MSSP”) “attributes” patients mainly to an ACO’s primary care physicians based on where they receive a plurality of primary care services. Medicare patients have freedom of choice, so in some areas, there is problematic patient leakage that makes care management and financial forecasting difficult. While this may become the default assignment standard, it is preferable in agreements with private payers to have the patient assigned to the network and reflect this on a patient’s enrollment card. It is important to determine how long patients must be enrolled before their performance measurements should occur.
- **Identify Any Service Carve-Outs** – Most arrangements cover the full range of services, which makes savings calculations much easier. However, sometimes pharmacy, mental health, organ transplants, dental, pediatric, out-of-area, emergency, catastrophic or untrackable services are carved out. It is possible that a specialty or type of service not provided within a network may be excluded.

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- **Strive to Achieve More Than Cost Savings** – The goals and performance metrics are to uphold the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services’ (“CMS”) “Triple Aim” Vision—improved population health, enhanced patient satisfaction and decreased cost. Only if the hurdles of the first two are met are you eligible for shared savings.
- **Think Beyond Performance Metrics** – Performing well on a payer’s list of metrics is the way to maximize reimbursement; however, it is not sufficient just to “teach the test.” In order to succeed, an ACO needs to have the right infrastructure investments in place to deliver better quality and lower cost care for populations of patients. This includes investments in care management for engaging patients inside and outside of the health system and information technology for tracking gaps in care and clinical outcomes over time. Metric selection should align with hospital initiatives to successfully redesign the delivery of care for patients and families. It also is prudent to standardize metrics across payers to the extent possible.
- **Pin Down How Savings Are Determined** – Although the concept is simple—the ACO gets a share of savings if it is able to do a good job at managing costs of the attributed population—carefully reviewing how savings will be determined is essential. For example, shared savings contracts may include downside risk to the provider if cost targets are not met and it is important to consider your organization’s appetite for financial risk before entering into such an agreement. It also is recommended not to focus solely on year-over-year performance. Accountable care is a marathon, not a sprint, and requires a dedicated commitment from leadership to transform into an effective population manager.
- **Obtain Payer Support** – Increasingly, payers are providing resources and support to fledgling ACOs to help achieve the goal of higher value care. Consider negotiating for such things as the following:
 - **Data** – Seek supplementary claims and other health and financial data. Payers sometimes offer database access, reporting tools, utilization, cost and other reports. ACOs cannot effectively assess where the waste is or how they are doing without access to this type of information.
 - **Help with Patient-Centered Medical Homes (“PCMHs”)** – Payers often assist providers in establishing accredited PCMHs and provide enhanced fee-for-service or performance payments to support practice transformation.

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- Payer-supplied care coordination training.
- Participation rights to roundtables and forums.
- **Other Contract Considerations** – A shared savings negotiation checklist also should include consideration of the following:
 - Flexibility for the ACO to localize the most appropriate value-adding programs;
 - Description of duties of payer and providers;
 - Description of the association of shared savings with fee-for-service payments;
 - Benefit design and co-pays to facilitate achieving your care management goals; and
 - Marketing and steerage—will your organization be in a “narrow network?”

X. Conclusion

America's health care system will soon become unaffordable absent major change. The accountable care movement holds promise to address runaway costs and thus must be taken seriously. There are opportunities for professional and financial reward for informed rural health providers and community health partners. Put another way, the risks of passivity are just too great. All the alternatives are unacceptable to a provider-led system of providing the highest quality at the lowest cost. Rural community caregivers and support organizations have skills and experience that position them to lead in the success of an ACO, but this is not yet widely utilized in the first wave of ACOs. To make sure a fair and sustainable ACO model becomes reality, it is important for the new configuration best suited for the rural environment to step up with like-minded providers to lead in this potentially career-changing transformation.

This *Guide* is intended to illustrate the significant opportunities for rural health care providers and communities in accountable care, to assist them in avoiding the pitfalls, and to help them develop accountable care strategies for their communities. For further information, contact the TAC Consortium and Initiative lead liaison, Melanie Phelps, at either mphelps@ncmedsoc.org or 919-833-3836, or its lead researcher and drafter, Bo Bobbitt, at either bbobbitt@smithlaw.com or 919-821-6612.

Part Three: Executing the Accountable Care Strategic Plan



North Carolina  **Medical Society**
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I. General Strategies For All Specialties

A. Strategy Number 1: How to Successfully Navigate the Medicare MSSP and Advance Payment Model Application Process

America's largest payor, Medicare, has committed to the ACO model, with a minimum of 50% sharing of savings to ACO providers on top of fee-for-service payments. It may be totally or partially physician-driven, and only primary care physicians are required. To promote physician-only ACOs in non-metropolitan areas, CMS will prefund them through the Advance Payment Model. This level of sustainable funding through ongoing shared savings distributions can "pay for" your ACO operations that can in turn be used for Medicaid, private payor, or other patient population engagements. **The applications are consistent with the principles and strategies of this Physicians' ACO Toolkit, and it is a useful reference to assist in responding to substantive portions of the applications.**

To review, CMS established the Medicare Shared Savings Program (the "MSSP") to facilitate coordination and cooperation among health care providers through ACOs to improve the quality of care for Medicare beneficiaries, while reducing unnecessary costs. In addition, the PPACA established a new Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovations (the "Innovation Center") to test innovative care and service delivery models, including the "Advance Payment Model." This Chapter will assist ACOs in navigating the MSSP and Advance Payment Model application process.

1. MSSP Application

Applying to the MSSP requires ACOs to submit a significant amount of information. As a result, organization, information gathering, and timing will all be critical for ACOs wishing to participate. The application process can be broken down into the following seven tasks: (a) identify timelines and deadlines; (b) creation and formation of the ACO; (c) file Notice of Intent to Apply; (d) obtain CMS User ID; (e) prepare and execute participation agreements; (f) prepare application; and (g) file application with CMS.

a. **Timelines and Deadlines** – Due to the sheer volume of information that must be submitted with the MSSP application, ACOs should begin the application process at least three months in advance. At the outset, ACOs interested in applying should review CMS's MSSP website, www.cms.gov/Medicare/Medicare-Fee-for-Service-Payment/sharedsavingsprogram/index.html, and identify all relevant deadlines. The ACO should then create a task checklist to ensure that all documents, forms, and applications are timely filed. The list of tasks set forth below may serve as a useful template in creating such a checklist.

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b. **Creation and Formation of the ACO** – ACOs applying to the MSSP must ensure that they are properly organized or incorporated under applicable state laws. Newly formed ACOs will need to file Articles of Organization or Articles of Incorporation with the applicable Secretary of State. Newly formed ACOs will also need an Employer Identification Number from the IRS, which may be obtained online at <https://sa.www4.irs.gov/modiein/individual/index.jsp>.

The ACO must also have an identifiable governing body, such as a board of directors, with responsibility for oversight and strategic direction of the ACO. The ACO must ensure that its participants have at least 75% control of the governing body, and at least one member of the governing body must be a Medicare beneficiary. In addition, the governing body must have a conflict of interest policy that: (a) requires each member of the governing body to disclose relevant financial interests; (b) provides a procedure to determine whether a conflict of interest exists, and sets forth a process to address any conflicts that arise; and (c) addresses remedial action for members of the governing body that fail to comply with the policy.

Finally, the ACO must appoint officers with leadership and oversight responsibility for the ACO. At a minimum, such officers must include an executive officer, a medical director, and a compliance officer. The executive officer (such as a president, CEO, or executive director) must have leadership responsibility for the ACO, including the ability to influence or direct the ACO's clinical practices to improve efficiency, processes, and outcomes. The medical director must oversee the clinical management of the ACO. The compliance officer must be responsible for addressing compliance issues related to the ACO's operations and performance. The ACO will need to appoint all such officers prior to applying for the MSSP.

c. **Notice of Intent to Apply** – Before applying to the MSSP and Advance Payment Model, ACOs must file a Notice of Intent to Apply (“NOI”) with CMS. ACOs should be aware that the filing deadline for the NOI will be approximately three months prior to the filing deadline for the MSSP application. While all ACOs that wish to apply to the MSSP must file the NOI, filing the NOI does not obligate the ACO to complete the application process. Thus, **ACOs that are even remotely interested in the MSSP should submit a Notice of Intent to Apply to preserve the opportunity to later submit the MSSP application.**

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d. **CMS User ID** – CMS currently requires all interested ACOs to file the MSSP application online using CMS's secure web portal, the Health Plan Management System ("HPMS"); CMS will not accept paper applications. In order to use HPMS, the ACO must obtain a user ID and password using the CMS Form 20037 Application for Access to CMS Computer Systems, available at: www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/CMS-Information-Technology/InformationSecurity/Downloads/EUAaccessform.pdf. After the ACO files the NOI, the ACO will receive an email from CMS with instructions for completing the Form 20037, along with the deadline for filing the Form 20037. The individual who will be preparing the MSSP application for the ACO should file the Form 20037.

e. **Participation Agreement** – ACOs applying to the MSSP must have participation agreements with their participating providers. At a minimum, the participation agreement must include: (a) an explicit requirement that the ACO participant will comply with the requirements and conditions of the MSSP; (b) a description of the ACO participants' rights and obligations in and representation by the ACO; (c) a description of how the opportunity for shared savings or other financial arrangements will encourage ACO participants to adhere to the ACO's quality assurance and improvement program and evidence-based clinical guidelines; and (d) remedial measures that will apply to ACO participants in the event of non-compliance with the requirements of their agreements with the ACO. The ACO will need to submit its signed participation agreements with each of its participants when it applies to the MSSP. As a result, ACOs will need to prepare their participation agreements well in advance of the application filing deadline and ensure adequate time to collect signed copies from participants.

f. **Preparing the Application** – As noted above, CMS now requires ACOs to file the MSSP application online using HPMS. Before completing the application online, however, ACOs should prepare all application materials in advance to ensure a smooth online application process. The ACO should first download and review the MSSP application template from the MSSP website. The ACO should use this document to assist in collecting and organizing contact information and other background information from ACO participants.

The ACO will also need to prepare a list of its participants, including the taxpayer identification number for each ACO participant. In order to avoid delays in the application process, the ACO will need to confirm that each participant's name and taxpayer identification number listed in the MSSP application match exactly what is listed in the Medicare Provider Enrollment, Chain, and Ownership System (PECOS) for such participants. In addition, the ACO will need to prepare an organizational chart that includes the names of the ACO participants, governing board members, committees and committee members, and officers.

A significant portion of the MSSP application consists of certain narrative responses that must be completed by the ACO. These narratives include descriptions of: (a) the ACO's history, mission, and

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organization; (b) how the ACO plans to use shared savings payments; (c) how the ACO will use and protect Medicare data; (d) how the ACO will require its participants to comply with and implement its quality assurance and improvement program; (e) how the ACO defines, establishes, implements, evaluates, and periodically updates its process to promote evidence-based medicine; (f) how the ACO defines, establishes, implements, evaluates, and periodically updates its process to promote patient engagement; (g) how the ACO defines, establishes, implements, evaluates, and periodically updates its process and infrastructure to support internal reporting on quality and cost metrics; and (h) how the ACO defines, establishes, implements, evaluates, and periodically updates its care coordination processes. The ACO will need to carefully review the required elements of each narrative listed in the MSSP application and ensure that each element is discussed in detail; failure to address each required element may result in delay (or rejection) of the ACO's application. As mentioned, this Physicians' ACO Toolkit may be a useful aid in preparing this part of the application.

Assuming that the ACO has gathered all required information in advance, the process of filing the MSSP application through HPMS should be fairly straightforward. The ACO will first need to submit contact information for the ACO and complete certain attestations to ensure that the ACO meets all applicable requirements of the MSSP. The ACO will then submit supporting documentation (including the organizational chart, executed agreements, narratives, and other documentation described above). Prior to uploading this documentation, the ACO will need to review the MSSP application reference table for instructions regarding file names and other HPMS uploading requirements, which is available at: www.cms.gov/Medicare/Medicare-Fee-for-ServicePayment/sharedsavingsprogram/Downloads/MSSP-Reference-Table.pdf.

Finally, the ACO will need to complete the CMS Form 588 Electronic Funds Transfer Authorization Agreement. This agreement, along with a voided check, must be sent to CMS using tracked mail, such as certified mail, Federal Express, or United Parcel Service. The CMS Form 588 is available at: www.cms.gov/Medicare/CMS-Forms/CMS-Forms/downloads/cms588.pdf.

2. Conclusion

With this Medicare ACO roadmap, you should not feel concerned about successfully applying for both these programs. The substance sought by the actual questions is remarkably close to the principles and strategies of this Physician's ACO Toolkit. Together, if you have done the spadework to bring together the 8 Essential Elements, success should be straightforward.

B. Strategy Number 2: [UNDER CONSTRUCTION.]

C. Strategy Number 3: [UNDER CONSTRUCTION.]

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II. Specific Strategies for Specific Specialties

Accountable Care Guides for the following specialties can be accessed on the website for the Toward Accountable Care (TAC) Consortium and Initiative at <http://www.tac-consortium.org/resources/>.

A. Anesthesiologists. Previously, a separate copyrighted white paper and specialty-specific ACO strategic plan for anesthesiologists was developed by Smith Anderson and the North Carolina Society of Anesthesiologists (“NCSA”) ACO Task Force. It was underwritten by the NCSA, which holds distribution rights. If you are interested in obtaining a copy of these materials with permission, please contact the NCSA’s Executive Director, Karen Weishaar, at kweishaar@smithlaw.com.
http://www.tac-consortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Anesthesiologist_ACO_Toolkit.pdf

B. Cardiologists. Accountable Care Guide for Cardiologists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina chapter of American College of Cardiology and TAC personnel.

C. Child Psychiatrists. Accountable Care Guide for Child Psychiatrists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Council on Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and TAC personnel.

D. Community Health Partners. Accountable Care Guide for Community Health Partners was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Foundation for Advanced Health Programs and TAC personnel.

E. Dermatologists. Accountable Care Guide for Dermatologists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Medical Society and TAC personnel.

F. Emergency Medicine Physicians. Accountable Care Guide for Emergency Medicine Physicians was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina College of Emergency Physicians and TAC personnel.

G. Family Physicians. Previously, a separate copyrighted white paper and specialty-specific ACO strategic plan was developed for family physicians. It was underwritten by the North Carolina Academy of Family Physicians, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and several state chapters. A copy of the paper and strategic plan may be accessed at www.ncafp.com or by contacting Brent Hazelett, Deputy Executive Vice President, at bhazelett@ncafp.com.
http://www.ncafp.com/files/ACOGuide-CME_1.pdf

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H. Gynecologists. Accountable Care Guide for Gynecologists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Obstetrical and Gynecological Society and TAC personnel.

I. Hospice and Palliative Care. Accountable Care Guide for Hospice and Palliative Care was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the Carolinas Center for Hospice and End of Life Care and TAC personnel.

J. Hospitalists. Accountable Care Guide for Hospitalists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Medical Society and TAC personnel.

K. Local Health Departments. Accountable Care Guide for Local Health Departments was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Medical Society and TAC personnel.

L. Internal Medicine. Accountable Care Guide for Internists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Chapter of the American College of Physicians and TAC personnel.

M. Nephrologists. Accountable Care Guide for Nephrologists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Medical Society and TAC personnel.

N. Neurologists. Accountable Care Guide for Neurologists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of North Carolina Neurological Society and TAC personnel.

O. Obstetricians. Accountable Care Guide for Obstetricians was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Obstetrical and Gynecological Society and TAC personnel.

P. Oncologists. Accountable Care Guide for Oncologists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Oncology Association and TAC personnel.

Q. Ophthalmologists. Accountable Care Guide for Ophthalmologists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Medical Society and TAC personnel.

R. Orthopedics. Accountable Care Guide for Orthopedics was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Medical Society and TAC personnel.

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S. Pediatricians. Accountable Care Guide for Pediatricians was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Pediatric Society and TAC personnel.

T. Psychiatrists. Accountable Care Guide for Psychiatrists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Psychiatric Association and TAC personnel.

U. Pulmonologists. Accountable Care Guide for Pulmonologists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Medical Society and TAC personnel.

V. Radiologists. Accountable Care Guide for Radiologists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Radiologic Society and TAC personnel.

W. Rheumatologists. Accountable Care Guide for Rheumatologists was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Medical Society and TAC personnel.

X. Rural Health. Accountable Care Guide for Rural Health was developed by the Accountable Care Workgroup of the North Carolina Medical Society and TAC personnel.

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